

**UNIVERSITY OF WINCHESTER**

Present and Accounted For:

Making Sense of Death and the Dead in Late Postmodern Culture

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Doctor of Philosophy

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This thesis has been completed as a requirement for a postgraduate research degree of the  
University of Winchester.

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**ABSTRACT**

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This thesis examines engagement with death and the dead in what is defined here as late postmodern culture. It is argued that late postmodern culture offers a hospitable environment for death and the dead, in large part due to the confluence of postmodern impulses to include voices from the margins with capitalism's exhaustive inclusion of everything into the market. The thesis is situated as a contribution to the field of death studies. It adopts an interdisciplinary humanities approach, drawing on a range of theory and in particular theory associated with postmodernism and deconstruction. It is argued that death studies as an academic formation can benefit from a wide range of disciplinary and interdisciplinary perspectives, including those aligned with the humanities. The phrase 'making sense' is utilised to denote a process of meaning making that is always active and ongoing. The ways in which death and the dead are 'made sense' of in a range of examples including theory, autobiography, artwork, popular discourses and television are explored. The thesis defines late postmodern culture and examines the treatment and positioning of death and the dead within it. It goes on to argue that the self has taken on a particular primacy in the current moment, with significant consequences in terms of death and the dead. Autobiographical engagement with death and the dead by Julian Barnes, Jenny Diski and Will Self are examined in light of the notion of autothanatography before the resurrection of the dead in visual media is explored, with a particular focus on three television series: *Les Revenants*, *In The Flesh* and *The Fades*. It is argued that death and the dead are central to late postmodern culture and present in a wide range of cultural production within it, and that a particular emphasis on the responsibility and accountability of the living toward the dead is beginning to emerge.

Keywords: Death Studies, Death, Dead, Interdisciplinary, Postmodernism.

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## Introduction

*With every death, a world disappears.*

Zygmunt Bauman reflecting on the work of Jacques Derrida<sup>1</sup>

In 2017 the journal *Cultural Studies* published an article formed of a conversation between the author James Marriott and the late Doreen Massey, titled 'just because you are dead, doesn't mean you haven't got opinions.'<sup>2</sup> The article acknowledges that engagement between the living and the dead is nothing new, citing an anecdote about Hannah Arendt's close friendship with Rahel Varnhagen who had been dead for over a century when they met. From quite a different cultural coordinate, in 2018 *Teen Vogue* featured a brief article seeking to normalise talking to dead loved ones, reassuring its readers this constitutes a healthy approach to grief.<sup>3</sup> Elsewhere Kendrick Lamar's album *To Pimp a Butterfly* (2015) included a conversation between him and Tupac Shakur.<sup>4</sup> The two never had the opportunity to speak when Shakur was alive, but using audio from shortly before Shakur's death in 1996, Lamar engages in a dialogue. This thesis examines an impulse to engage with both death and the dead identifiable in a range of recent literary and visual texts, in theory and more broadly in what is defined here as late postmodern culture. It argues that this engagement is a central tenet of the contemporary *zeitgeist*, posing a challenge to the death denial thesis and to what Ruth Penfold-Mounce has described as "that dreadful public wisdom that death is taboo."<sup>5</sup> Due to the confluence of capitalism and postmodernism in their late stages, late postmodern culture has become a hospitable environment for the dead. Taking an interdisciplinary, humanities approach, the thesis is situated in the field of death studies. It draws on literary, cultural and critical theory, in particular postmodernist and deconstructionist approaches, to examine the presence of death and the accountability of the living toward the dead in a broad range of recent cultural texts.

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<sup>1</sup> Zygmunt Bauman interviewed by Michael Hviid Jacobsen, "Sociology, mortality and solidarity: an interview with Zygmunt Bauman on death, dying and immortality," *Mortality* 16.4 (2011): 388, doi: 10.1080/13576275.2011.614445

<sup>2</sup> James Marriott, "'Just because you are dead, doesn't mean you haven't got opinions': a conversation with Doreen Massey," *Cultural Studies* (2017), doi: 10.1080/09502386.2017.1354051

<sup>3</sup> Danielle Corcione, "For Those in Grief, Talking to a Dead Loved One is Good for Mental Health: And it's totally normal," *Teen Vogue*, August 30, 2018, accessed June 21, 2020, <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/grief-talking-to-a-dead-loved-one-is-good-for-mental-health>

<sup>4</sup> Kendrick Lamar, "Mortal Man," *To Pimp a Butterfly*, MP3, Aftermath, Interscope, Top Dawg, 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Ruth Penfold-Mounce and Julie Rugg, "How does culture understand death?," *Emerald Publishing* (2018), accessed February 21, 2019, <https://soundcloud.com/user-163454702-828217667/how-does-culture-understand-death>

## Caring for death studies

In some ways, situating this thesis in the field of death studies is impossible. As this introduction considers, academic fields and disciplines operate within and are shaped by institutional structures. Having studied at a number of universities, ‘death studies’ has not been an option on the registration drop-down menu at any of them. As Susan Dobscha has pointed out, though people have “been writing about death since the first writers took pen to parchment,” death has until recently been a focus “noticeably absent in academic enquiry.”<sup>6</sup> Yet, this thesis has been developed and cultivated through engagement with death studies research and infrastructures. Initially proposed as interdisciplinary, drawing primarily on literary, cultural and critical theory, in the early stages of the research the field of death studies came into view. It was through death studies conferences, networks and journals that it became possible to advance the different understandings presented here.

Ted Striphas, in taking over as editor of the academic journal *Cultural Studies*, set out an approach to caring for cultural studies. He felt this to be necessary in the face of its “waning” as a “scholarly formation,” its “shrinking institutional footprint,” its need to contend with a reduction in publishers or book series dedicated to it, and the presence of a “host of intellectual fellow travelers” such as actor network theory that seemed to be absorbing “some of the controversy, charisma, and authority” of cultural studies.<sup>7</sup> Though death studies seems to be a growing formation rather than a waning one, with new book series, networks and conferences emerging, Striphas’s guidance on caring for cultural studies can aid an understanding of the ways in which disciplinary infrastructures support the development of both a field of study and the work that emerges within it. He draws attention to the importance of “infrastructuralists,” people “both past and present, working in all parts of the globe” who

have built programmes and centres, journals and book series, courses and curriculum, conferences [...] any number of other nodes and networks that are no less Cultural Studies than its body of ideas. Indeed, that body of ideas is nothing without a framework on which to hang. It is also nothing without the individuals and groups – too numerous to name, and sometimes challenging to identify – who have committed themselves to caring.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Susan Dobscha, “A brief, abbreviated introduction to death,” in *Death in a Consumer Culture*, ed. Susan Dobscha (London: Routledge, 2016), 2.

<sup>7</sup> Ted Striphas, “Caring for Cultural Studies,” *Cultural Studies* 33.1 (2019): 3, doi: 10.1080/09502386.2018.1543716

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

Striphas points out that the work he discusses frequently takes the form of invisible labour and emphasises that “academics need to do a much better job of making this ‘invisible college’ more visible, especially as its taken-for-granted status tends to reflect hierarchies of oppression for women and people of colour.”<sup>9</sup> He writes that the hallmarks of a discipline as care are “collecting and curating, sharing and nurturing,” and it is through infrastructures and the work of infrastructurists that these practises are facilitated.<sup>10</sup> Bridle *et al.* have similarly emphasised the importance of interdisciplinary encounters for instigating and cultivating interdisciplinary endeavours.<sup>11</sup> Through the infrastructures of death studies, it has been possible to challenge and develop the ideas formulated throughout the process of writing this thesis. This is the first reason for situating the work within death studies. The second is based on the view that death studies, and all interdisciplinary formations, can benefit from the inclusion of humanities approaches and perspectives.

Wittkowski *et al.*, in analysing the shifts in research published in *Omega* and *Death Studies* from 1991 to 2010, point out that despite the range of international journals focused on death, “it is probable that the greater percentage of scientific and scholarly literature in thanatology is dispersed across dozens of peer-reviewed publications” (thanatology is a term popular in the US and Canada, with death studies more popular in Europe).<sup>12</sup> This is perhaps particularly true of the humanities, partly because the humanities still tend to place a high value on monographs and partly because many, though not all, interdisciplinary death journals focus on inviting contributions from the social sciences.<sup>13</sup> One academic journal that takes up the challenge of inclusively promoting the interdisciplinary study of death and dying is *Mortality*, which emphasises that “death and dying do not belong to any one discipline.”<sup>14</sup> Wittkowski *et al.* state that multidisciplinary is a trend in thanatology and cite collaborations between psychology, social work,

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Helen Bridle, Anton Vrieling, Monica Cardillo, Yoseph Araya and Leonith Hinojosa, “Preparing for an interdisciplinary future: A perspective from early-career researchers,” *Futures* 5.3 (2013): 24, doi: 10.1016/j.futures.2013.09.003

<sup>12</sup> Joachim Wittkowski, Kenneth J. Doka, Robert A. Neimeyer and Michael Vallerga, “Publication Trends in Thanatology: An Analysis of Leading Journals,” *Death Studies* 39.8 (2015): 461, doi: 10.1080/07481187.2014.1000054

<sup>13</sup> Humanities monographs that can be understood as valuable contributions to death studies and discussed in this thesis include Khapaeva, 2017; Aaron, 2015; Leader, 2008; Gilbert, 2006; Butler, 2006; Dollimore, 2001.

<sup>14</sup> *Mortality*, “Aims and Scope,” *Mortality*, accessed June 3, 2020, <https://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?show=aimsScope&journalCode=cmrt20>



sociology, medicine and nursing, emphasising this tendency to foreground the social and applied sciences in the study of death. The majority of the articles they analyse focus on bereavement and grief, which they associate with clinical psychology. Whilst not seeking to contest the relationship between clinical psychology and research into grief and bereavement, this is perhaps one particularly pertinent example of where the humanities have something significant to offer. Chapter two considers how the theorist Jonathan Dollimore and the psychoanalyst Darian Leader have both explicitly emphasised the importance of the humanities and of literary responses in relation to grief and loss. As Dobscha has pointed out, before academic interest in death became established, it was being “heavily dissected in art form (books, plays, paintings, etc.),” predominantly understood as the realm of the arts and humanities.<sup>15</sup> Though by no means wishing to imply that research into death and the dead, grief, loss, corpses, bereavement and beyond should not continue to flourish in a range of disciplines, this thesis champions the inclusion of and engagement with humanities research within death studies. Penfold-Mounce has noted that there are a host of what might be called “transient death scholars” who contribute to death studies and leave their legacy for others to develop as they move on or return to other disciplines or scholarly foci.<sup>16</sup> To care for death studies would not be to insist that all those contributing take up permanent membership. Rather, it would be to ensure that it remains welcoming to a range of approaches and disciplinary and interdisciplinary understandings and methods, offering fruitful opportunities for furthering knowledge, challenging ideas and opening up new ways of what will later be described, when considering the research approach adopted in this thesis, as ‘making sense.’

The value of the humanities has also been defended in relation to other interdisciplinary fields of study. Robert Bullough argues that, to its detriment, humanities approaches have been neglected in education studies. Though interdisciplinarity has been championed, he claims that most of what actually takes place, particularly in terms of graduate courses in the US, is multidisciplinary. For Bullough, in multidisciplinary “fields outside the social and certain physical sciences are discounted, and disciplinary frameworks are maintained while insights are borrowed from other frameworks, all more or less

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<sup>15</sup> Dobscha, “A brief, abbreviated introduction to death,” in *Death in a Consumer Culture*, 2.

<sup>16</sup> Ruth Penfold-Mounce and Julie Rugg, “How does culture understand death?,” *Emerald Publishing* (2018), accessed February 21, 2019, <https://soundcloud.com/user-163454702-828217667/how-does-culture-understand-death>

residing within the same conceptual and methodological family.”<sup>17</sup> He argues that in this “what seems neglected is the value of the tension arising from intense conversations across differing worldviews or patterns of sense-making about some puzzle or problem that is recognized in some way as shared.”<sup>18</sup> It is only through interdisciplinary conversations that “disciplinary boundaries are made permeable and interpretative horizons jarred and then forced outward.”<sup>19</sup> This thesis does not conceive of death as a ‘puzzle’ or ‘problem’ to be solved. This kind of approach is one that, as discussed later, can be antithetical to the aims of humanities research and in particular research aligned with postmodernism. However, it does argue that there is value in the opening up of interpretative horizons through engagement with different disciplinary perspectives and potentially provocative worldviews.

A pertinent example of the ways different approaches and worldviews might benefit death studies emerges from a close reading of Wittkowski *et al.*’s article. In their analysis of publishing trends, they ascribe to the notion that “there is an extensive, yet distanced and artificial presentation of dying and dead individuals in the media, especially on TV, whereas a serious consideration of mortality is excluded from real life.”<sup>20</sup> This thesis examines a range of challenges to the assumptions the authors make here both in terms of the notion that death is denied in ‘real life’ and that television and the media are insufficiently ‘serious’ to constitute a part of ‘real life.’ A range of research from the humanities and social sciences as well as interdisciplinary endeavours have all emphasised the ways in which television operates as a space through which people experience and engage with complex social understandings. Reed and Penfold-Mounce, for example, have demonstrated the ways in which the popular television series *The Walking Dead* (2010 -) has inspired “the sociological imagination amongst its largely non-scholarly audience,” prompting reflection on and engagement not only with death but with “sweeping sociological themes of biography, relationality, embodiment, mobility and emotion.”<sup>21</sup> It is

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<sup>17</sup> Robert V. Bullough, “Developing Interdisciplinary Researchers: Whatever Happened to the Humanities in Education?,” *Educational Researcher*, 35.8 (2006): 3, doi: 10.3102/0013189X035008003

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Wittkowski *et al.*, “Publication Trends in Thanatology,” 454.

<sup>21</sup> Darren Reed and Ruth Penfold-Mounce, “Zombies and the Sociological Imagination: The Walking Dead as Social-Science Fiction,” in *The Zombie Renaissance in Popular Culture*, eds. Laura Hubner, Marcus Leaning and Paul Manning (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015), 136-137; *The Walking Dead*, developed by Frank Darabont, AMC studios, 2010 – present, Television Series.

only through engagement with a range of disciplines that death studies can avoid discounting, for example, the importance of cultural representations to the ways that people 'make sense' of and engage with death.

It is not the case that certain understandings emanate from the humanities whilst others emanate only from the social and applied sciences, or any other umbrella disciplines. There seems to be no clear dividing disciplinary line, for example, along which the death denial thesis examined in chapter two is adhered to or challenged. There are also a range of excellent examples of death studies infrastructures (enabled by the often-invisible labour of infrastructurists) that have embraced the humanities, in particular in Europe. Within death studies, a range of formal and informal infrastructures have emerged both online and offline in different countries and contexts. A number of these are considered here in terms of their inclusion of perspectives from the humanities. The infrastructures of death studies include organisations, collectives, academic journals, centres at academic institutions, postgraduate and undergraduate degree programmes, book series, societies and conferences, both academic and inclusive of practitioners and professionals working in the death industry. The individuals and groups that form the infrastructures of death studies, as Striphas finds when considering those of cultural studies, are numerous and at times difficult to identify.<sup>22</sup> Cumulatively, they build a framework supporting death studies as a vibrant field of study.

The University of Winchester's MA in Death, Religion and Culture is one such example, offering modules on death and visual culture, philosophy and world religions alongside social theory and professional practice. The qualification offers an important counterpoint to undergraduate courses that tend to be situated within health faculties, such as The Open University's foundational modules on death, dying and bereavement. The Death and Culture Network at the University of York is inclusive of a range of disciplines. The network's conferences have featured keynotes from historians, scholars working in film studies, literature, media studies and poetics, with papers from a wide range of researchers and practitioners. The Death and the Maiden collective also adopts a broad and inclusive approach, seeking to engage with death "through science, literature, art, first person narratives, culture, history and current events."<sup>23</sup> The Centre for Death and Life

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<sup>22</sup> Striphas, "Caring for Cultural Studies," 3.

<sup>23</sup> Death and the Maiden, "Death and the Maiden," accessed February 21, 2019, <https://deadmaidens.com/>

Studies at Durham University and the Centre for Death and Society at the University of Bath seek to foster research in the arts and humanities, social and life-sciences, as well as contributions from medicine and practitioners, and The Association for the Study of Death and Society has similar aims. Recently, the emergence of networks and collectives that seek to prompt a shift within death studies have emerged, with The Collective for Radical Death Studies, formed in 2019, seeking to decolonise death studies, create a “Radical Death Canon” and “increase diversity in death scholarship” in order that practitioners and researchers might “better understand deathways of people of color and marginalized groups.”<sup>24</sup>

The Queer Death Studies Network, launched in 2016 in Sweden, focuses on approach over discipline, though the approaches they advocate have their own disciplinary politics. Its infrastructuralists aim to create a space for researchers as well as activists, artists and practitioners who “critically and (self) reflexively investigate and challenge conventional normativities, assumptions, expectations, and regimes of truths that are brought to life and made evident by death.”<sup>25</sup> The network claims “conventional engagements with the questions of death, dying and mourning are insufficient and reductive,” often adopting “normative notions of the subject; interhuman and human/nonhuman bonds; family relations and communities; rituals; and finally, experiences of grief, mourning, and bereavement.”<sup>26</sup> Though this thesis challenges a number of assumptions, in particular in relation to the death denial thesis in chapter two, it does not dismiss ‘conventional’ engagement with death as reductive or insufficient. Rather, an approach is adopted which seeks to recognise that contributions from all disciplines and standpoints can offer valuable insight and moreover, different readings of and responses to texts, academic or otherwise, might open up different possibilities. For example, for the Queer Death Studies Network and beyond, ‘queer’ stands to convey a range of meanings. It can signal research concerns, most obviously a focus on gender and sexuality, but also ‘queer’ practices and methodologies that seek to unsettle, subvert and challenge regardless of research focus. In this sense ‘queer’ readings, and the closely related postmodernist readings applied here, can open up

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<sup>24</sup> The Collective for Radical Death Studies, “The Collective for Radical Death Studies,” accessed September 12, 2019, <https://radicaldeathstudies.com/about-crds/>

<sup>25</sup> The Queer Death Studies Network, “Queer Death Studies Network,” accessed February 21, 2019, <https://queerdeathstudies.wordpress.com/>

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

different possibilities in what might be deemed more 'conventional' engagement with death, for example through productive readings of the assumptions and dichotomies that underlie meaning in a given text. What this thesis seeks to champion is the value in a multiplicity of readings and a breadth of disciplinary and interdisciplinary perspectives.

### **Why defend the place of the humanities in death studies?**

The range of examples of death studies infrastructures cited above that welcome contributions from the humanities might raise the question of why there is a need to argue for the importance of their inclusion within the field. The answer is that though the humanities are welcomed in a range of death studies infrastructures, this does not necessarily translate into their residence within them. For a range of reasons, the humanities are not as visible as other umbrella disciplines in death studies infrastructures. The humanities as a whole are widely acknowledged as being under threat, their own infrastructures and infrastructurists under attack for a range of commercial, ideological and structural reasons.<sup>27</sup> Marina Warner has pointed out that it seems as if "the humanities are surviving on sufferance, because so many students for some reason still want to study subjects like English literature or history."<sup>28</sup> Approaches associated with the humanities have also been criticised when utilised within other disciplines. For example, the 'cultural turn' in sociology has not been well received by all, with Rojek and Turner disappointed by the "trend in contemporary sociology where 'culture' has eclipsed the 'social' and where literary interpretation has marginalized sociological methods."<sup>29</sup> They argue that reading things politically has led to a lack of authentic engagement with politics and policy making, a rather prescient critique in the aftermath of the Sokal Squared hoax that sought to label a range of research in gender, critical and cultural theory as 'grievance studies'.<sup>30</sup>

Yet in some ways the humanities remain popular. Cohen explains there is "a high degree of receptivity for expertise" in the humanities outside of academia, with humanities

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<sup>27</sup> Among others see Stefan Collini, *What are Universities For?* (London: Penguin, 2012); Helen Small, *The Value of the Humanities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Marina Warner, "Learning my Lesson," *London Review of Books* 37.6, 19 March, 2015, accessed June 21, 2020, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v37/n06/marina-warner/learning-my-lesson>

<sup>28</sup> Warner, "Learning my Lesson."

<sup>29</sup> Chris Rojek and Bryan Turner, "Decorative sociology: A critique of the cultural turn," *Sociological Review* 48.4 (2000): 629, doi: 10.1111/1467-954X.00236

<sup>30</sup> For a discussion of the Sokal Squared hoax see Striplhas, "Caring for Cultural Studies," 10.

monographs often on best sellers lists.<sup>31</sup> Techniques of reading and analysis associated with the humanities can also be seen to proliferate beyond academic disciplines, with Alec Charles arguing that bloggers and social media users have taken on the role of applying close and critical reading practices.<sup>32</sup> Though they may not be seen, many argue wrongly, as disciplines for addressing urgent social and cultural concerns, there is an acknowledgment that the “issues of cultural meaning and value” examined in the humanities remain “important to individual citizens, businesses, government bodies and institutions.”<sup>33</sup> Van Dijck has stated that the questions humanities scholars “raise about the role of language, images, art and culture are immensely important, even if the answers cannot always be measured.”<sup>34</sup> Yet van Dijck also suggests that the difficulty of measuring research in the humanities has meant that “it’s only humanities scholars who are asked ‘What use are you to us?’ and who need to justify their usefulness and value.”<sup>35</sup> This is untrue. As Penfold-Mounce has emphasised, the neoliberalisation of higher education poses a threat for any field or research that lacks “perceived social usefulness.”<sup>36</sup> This is particularly so in contexts in which very narrow definitions of social usefulness and impact are exercised. Gary Hall has cautioned of the consequences of neoliberalisation for teaching as well as research, with it now “all too easy to imagine fewer and fewer academics being prepared to take a chance on teaching the kind of critically inclined arts and humanities courses that run the risk of being rated as difficult, complex, or otherwise economically unproductive and unviable.”<sup>37</sup> Penfold-Mounce similarly warns of risks to “creative or innovative research that is not easily measurable,” is deemed “frivolous,” or that might not “provide sufficient, to borrow a key word from our times, impact.”<sup>38</sup> In the face of such challenges, any teaching deemed to lack economic value or social usefulness and any research whose ‘pathways to impact’ are not immediately clear are under threat.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Job Cohen, *Sustainable Humanities: Report from the National Committee on the Future of the Humanities in the Netherlands* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009), 27.

<sup>32</sup> Alec Charles, *Underwords: Re-reading the Subtexts of Modernity* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2018), 1.

<sup>33</sup> Cohen, *Sustainable Humanities*, 17.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Ruth Penfold-Mounce, “Conducting frivolous research in neoliberal universities: what is the value of glossy topics?,” *Celebrity Studies* 6:2 (2015): 254, doi: 10.1111/1467-954X.00236

<sup>37</sup> Gary Hall, *The Uberfication of the University* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2016), 31.

<sup>38</sup> Penfold-Mounce, “Conducting frivolous research,” 254.

<sup>39</sup> ‘Pathways to Impact’ is the term utilised by UK Research and Innovation, “Pathways to Impact,” accessed February 21, 2019, <https://www.ukri.org/innovation/excellence-with-impact/pathways-to-impact/>

Beer and Penfold-Mounce have coined the term 'glossy topic' to denote those areas of research that are of high public interest but are not necessarily deemed of high public value, such as the study of celebrity. They see 'glossy topics' as an opportunity, suggesting that it is through 'glossy topics' that "we might rejuvenate the humanities and social sciences in a context in which their value and purpose is being questioned with some force."<sup>40</sup> The challenge, they point out, is how the value of such topics might be conveyed. Sarah Churchwell makes a similar argument, seeing the 'impact agenda' as a 'trojan horse' for the humanities.<sup>41</sup> Innovative approaches coupled with engaging methodologies and dissemination practices are likely to be required. Death is a particularly interesting example in relation to the notion of a 'glossy topic.' Few would challenge the idea that death has an important place in the cultural imagination. Sandra Gilbert points out that "our communal history may be most deeply shaped by memories of collective trauma."<sup>42</sup> Though people may remember the birthdays, marriages and numerous joyous occasions in their own personal lives, at a cultural level, Gilbert argues, death days are more memorable. Countless people remember where they were when Princess Diana, Michael Jackson or JFK died. Though the death denial thesis examined in chapter two complicates the notion that death might be of public interest, implying instead that it is sequestered and taboo, this thesis argues that the wide range of engagement with death, in literature, film and television, in death cafés, the death positive movement and online, for example, demonstrate that death is a topic of significant public interest. Though most people would not accuse death of being a 'frivolous' topic, it does have, as Eagleton points out, the potential to be a bit 'corny.' As he states, "few things are more mind-shrinking than the truth that everything perishes, and few more corny either."<sup>43</sup> Yet it is perhaps this that makes the study of death so potentially engaging beyond academia. Despite common sense assumptions that talking about death is something that people find uncomfortable, no such discomfort has been encountered during the process of completing this research. Rather it has seemed that when it comes to death, as the aphorism goes, 'everyone's got an opinion.' The study of death, including through a humanities lens focused on human

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<sup>40</sup> David Beer and Ruth Penfold-Mounce, "Researching glossy topics: the case of the academic study of celebrity," *Celebrity Studies* 1.3 (2010): 363, doi: 10.1080/19392397.2010.511503

<sup>41</sup> Sarah Churchwell, *Future of the Humanities: Keynote Speech*, Leeds Beckett University, July 18, 2016, accessed June 21, 2020, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uzV64\\_ANaSc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uzV64_ANaSc)

<sup>42</sup> Sandra M. Gilbert, *Death's Door: Modern Dying and the Ways We Grieve* (New York and London: Norton, 2006), xvii.

<sup>43</sup> Terry Eagleton, "Good dinners pass away, so do tyrants and toothache," *London Review of Books* 20. 8, April 16, 1998: 13, accessed June 21, 2020, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v20/n08/terry-eagleton/good-dinners-pass-away-so-do-tyrants-and-toothache>

expression and cultural meanings, might offer interesting avenues for translating interest into value.

One of the arguments in chapter two is that the recycling of the death denial argument is so common because it is used to justify engagement with death by practitioners, researchers and journalists in an environment where strict competition is in place for funds and resources. Though the need to justify engagement with topics central to human experience is widespread, the need for each individual researcher or research team to justify and emphasise the value in their own work in a competitive marketplace within higher education is in itself a facet of the marketisation of universities. Preferably, broader conceptions of value, worth and impact might be cultivated at a societal and institutional level, within a context of greater funding and support for both research and higher education as public goods. Yet the humanities cannot wait for this kind of social, economic and cultural paradigm shift. Justin Stover suggests that “the humanities are not just dying – they are almost dead.”<sup>44</sup> Both Stover and Armstrong have argued that the best way to defend the humanities is to practise them.<sup>45</sup> In adopting an interdisciplinary humanities approach to the study of death and the dead, the intention is to participate, in some very small way, in the defence of the humanities both within and beyond death studies.

This is not an attempt, however, to ‘pit’ the humanities against any other disciplinary umbrella. Helen Small examines the ways in which academic disciplines have been constructed and notes it is largely since the 1940s that a broad range of practices and subjects sharing similarities in either subject matter or approach have come to be grouped together as the humanities.<sup>46</sup> Given that most students specialise from early on in their studies in the UK, the humanities can to some extent be seen as an administrative term within institutions. As humanities departments become fractured and combined with others, this becomes more fraught. Small points out that the humanities have a “distinctive disciplinary character” and a “distinctive understanding of what constitutes knowledge,” which will be discussed later.<sup>47</sup> She points out that they have traditionally been compared

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<sup>44</sup> Justin Stover, “There is no case for the humanities,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 4, 2018, accessed June 21, 2020, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/There-Is-No-Case-for-the/242724>

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., and Isobel Armstrong, cited in Marina Warner, “Learning my Lesson,” *London Review of Books* 37.6, 19 March, 2015, accessed June 21, 2020, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v37/n06/marina-warner/learning-my-lesson>

<sup>46</sup> Small, *The Value of the Humanities*, 14.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 4.



with and at times opposed to the sciences. However, there has recently been a significant growth in scholarship and infrastructures in the medical humanities, challenging this division to some extent. Small warns of a recent shift toward casting the social sciences in opposition to the humanities and cautions against “reinventing the two cultures debate with the social sciences now mis-described as the antagonist.”<sup>48</sup> Though it is vital to maintain a “core description of the distinctiveness of humanistic interpretation,” this need not become a divisive endeavour.<sup>49</sup> Drawing on research from a range of disciplines within and beyond the humanities and adopting an approach to analysis most closely aligned with the humanities, this thesis seeks to acknowledge and celebrate the value in all disciplines.

### **Interdisciplinarity**

There are a number of reasons why an interdisciplinary approach has been adopted. Lovegrove has argued that there is at present a “pervasive obsession” with specialisation both within higher education and more broadly.<sup>50</sup> He associates ultra-specialisation with a “sustained assault” on the liberal arts and the decline in US students taking a humanities major (he puts this at fewer than 7%).<sup>51</sup> Poet Robert Twigger has written that, though he believes “humans are natural polymaths,” “our age reveres the specialist.”<sup>52</sup> He is critical of “over-specialisation,” arguing that it can lead to the defence of existing ideas rather than the fostering of new connections.<sup>53</sup> In this sense, the specialisation of individual researchers is tied up in the threats currently facing the humanities, with narrower definitions of value and impact being accompanied by narrower identities for researchers themselves. Moti Nissani argues that “to overcome the negative sides of specialization” the academy “must never forget that a vibrant community of scholars – just like a thriving ecosystem – nurtures specialists and generalists, diversity and interconnections.”<sup>54</sup> Nissani foregrounds the importance of nurturing both specialists and generalists and refutes any rejection of one or the other, or of different disciplines or scholarly activity. The tensions that can arise between disciplines, between specialists and generalists, and between what

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Nick Lovegrove, “The Danger of Having Too Many Experts,” *Time*, October 27, 2016, accessed June 21, 2020, <http://time.com/4547320/the-danger-of-having-too-many-experts/>

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Robert Twigger, “Master of Many Trades,” *AeON*, accessed February 21, 2019, <https://aeon.co/essays/we-live-in-a-one-track-world-but-anyone-can-become-a-polymath>

<sup>54</sup> Moti Nissani, “Ten Cheers for Interdisciplinarity: The Case for Interdisciplinary Knowledge and Research,” *The Social Science Journal* 34.2 (1997): 214, doi: 10.1016/S0362-3319(97)90051-3

Becher calls 'pure' and 'applied' subjects are often less intellectual than institutional.<sup>55</sup> As Steven Ward notes, much division is rather mundanely about "determining which group will be able to recruit the most allies, obtain the greatest level of funding, attract the most students, and, ultimately, gain organizational moral and ideological control of academia."<sup>56</sup> There seems also at present to be a rather contradictory demand for both interdisciplinarity (at the level of disciplines and research projects) and specialisation (at the level of the individual researcher and their outputs). Small critiques the term 'interdisciplinarity,' arguing that it is primarily adopted in order "to assist funding bodies in meeting the government-imposed requirements that public money should promote 'knowledge transfer,' 'economic relevance,' and 'impact' or social benefit."<sup>57</sup> However she also points out that "the increasing number of university courses requiring a liberal arts component at the introductory level is some evidence of a growing conviction in recent years that UK higher education would benefit from some liberalization of content."<sup>58</sup> Though entry level interdisciplinary modules are probably to some extent a cost saving initiative at many institutions, there are many reasons for championing interdisciplinary teaching and research within the humanities and beyond.

The most general definition of 'interdisciplinarity' is "any form of dialogue or interaction between two or more disciplines."<sup>59</sup> However, given that disciplines themselves are fluid, shifting and often constructed and delineated in response to economic, social and cultural forces, defining interdisciplinarity is inherently complex. Particular approaches or areas of knowledge can come to be associated with particular disciplines, or indeed with interdisciplinarity, for various reasons. The idea that individual disciplines have very particular approaches or methods can often be challenged from within a discipline. For example, sociology might be understood in a wide range of ways. C. Wright Mills wrote that the sociological imagination "consists of the capacity to shift from one perspective to another, and in the process to build up an adequate view of a total society and of its components," writing that there was "an unexpected quality about" it "perhaps because its essence is the combination of ideas that no one expected were combinable – say, a mess of

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<sup>55</sup> Tony Becher, "The significance of disciplinary differences," *Studies in Higher Education* 19:2 (1994), doi: 10.1080/03075079412331382007

<sup>56</sup> Steven Ward, "The Revenge of the Humanities: Reality, Rhetoric, and the Politics of Postmodernism," *Sociological Perspectives* 38.2 (1995): 111, doi: 10.2307/1389286

<sup>57</sup> Small, *The Value of the Humanities*, 16.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> Joe Moran, *Interdisciplinarity: The New Critical Idiom* (London: Routledge, 2001), 16.

ideas from German philosophy and British economics.”<sup>60</sup> What Mills described here shows the ways in which approaches and methods of analysis now often found only under the moniker of interdisciplinarity already have established histories within specific disciplines. To some extent discourses about interdisciplinarity shaped by institutional priorities and national research agendas risk undermining these histories, implying that disciplines have restrictive or monolithic approaches, or that interdisciplinarity is itself innovative or new.

Judith Butler has referred to the practice of drawing on the ideas and approaches of authors and methods from different disciplines as, rather than a form of interdisciplinarity, a form of “intellectual promiscuity.”<sup>61</sup> This means reading “together, in a syncretic vein” the work of intellectuals who have few alliances with one another, might not read each other and might not particularly care to be read together.<sup>62</sup> It is in this way, Nissani writes, that interdisciplinarians “must risk dilettantism” in order to gain a “bird's eye view.”<sup>63</sup> Literary critics, he suggests, are especially vulnerable to the possibility of becoming a jack of all trades, master of none due to their borrowing of theory from other disciplines (psychoanalysis, postcolonialism and feminism for example). Without significant investment of time and energy, it can be difficult to keep up to date with all of the fields drawn upon and the interdisciplinarian risks sliding “into naive generalism.”<sup>64</sup> Bridle *et al.* also identify risks associated with interdisciplinary research, including the possibility of it being more difficult for researchers to secure a job without a clear disciplinary identity, publish in prestigious journals or progress in academia when reward systems are largely centred around disciplines.<sup>65</sup> The risks of interdisciplinary study represent vital reasons to promote the ‘care’ of infrastructures and infrastructurists in death studies and other interdisciplinary formations.

One of the things that makes death studies particularly fascinating is the range of intellectual, conceptual and methodological paradigms through which researchers seek to approach it, given its widespread relevance. Rugg and Penfold-Mounce have emphasised the vast amount of sometimes conflicting perspectives, angles and ways of thinking that

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<sup>60</sup> C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), 211.

<sup>61</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York and London: Routledge, 2006), x.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> Nissani, “Ten Cheers for Interdisciplinarity,” 212.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 213.

<sup>65</sup> Bridle *et al.* “Preparing for an interdisciplinary future,” 24.

gather around death.<sup>66</sup> Julie Rugg points out that there are “hundreds and hundreds of ways of thinking about this part of our lives” and that the expansion of death studies has supported a host of researchers and practitioners to contribute to and develop fruitful areas of inquiry.<sup>67</sup> In this sense, the study of death might, rather than interdisciplinary, be conceived of as antidisiplinary. In a formidable study, John Mowitt deems an antidisiplinary object of research to be “constituted at the point where several different, institutionally regulated, ‘gestural’ practices converge.”<sup>68</sup> He points out that interpretative paradigms are supported by disciplinary power, governing the limits of interpretation within a particular field of knowledge. When an object of research is antidisiplinary, it refuses to be contained within the interpretative limits of a particular discipline. Antagonisms and ambivalence can emerge between the different interpretative and rendering practises applied to it. Death can never be consigned to one place and can never be fully rendered through any paradigm. The same can be said of the dead. As Glennys Howarth has written, “the dead are mobile, resisting practices which pin them down in cemeteries or consign them to past relationships, fading photographs or lost memories.”<sup>69</sup> Consequently the supposed universality and timelessness of death and the dead are to some extent a myth, given the multiplicity of understandings and experiences of both that have proliferated and continue to do so. As Maurice Jackson has emphasised, “all people die, but not all people die alike.”<sup>70</sup> It is in part the ways in which death and the dead embody contradiction and resist interpretative paradigms that makes them highly suited to interdisciplinary analysis.

## Research approach

The approach adopted in this thesis is aligned with research traditions in the humanities. Broadly, the humanities can be understood as the study of the

meaning-making practices of human culture, past and present, focusing on interpretation and critical evaluation, primarily in terms of the individual response and with an ineliminable element of subjectivity. It may be only at this level of

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<sup>66</sup> Ruth Penfold-Mounce and Julie Rugg, “How does culture understand death?,” *Emerald Publishing* (2018), accessed February 21, 2019, <https://soundcloud.com/user-163454702-828217667/how-does-culture-understand-death>

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> John Mowitt, *Text: The Genealogy of an Antidisiplinary Object* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992), 215.

<sup>69</sup> Glennys Howarth, “Dismantling the Boundaries between Life and Death,” *Mortality* 5.2 (2000): 135, doi: [10.1080/713685998](https://doi.org/10.1080/713685998)

<sup>70</sup> Maurice Jackson, “The Black Experience with Death,” In *Death and Dying: Views from Many Cultures*, ed. Richard Kalish (New York: Baywood Publishing Company, 1977), 92.

generalization that a positive description of their work can command complete assent – and the well-trained reader will quickly turn a critical eye on the words ‘meaning’, ‘culture’, ‘individual’, ‘subjectivity’ and probably ‘interpretation’ and ‘evaluation’ too.<sup>71</sup>

This thesis examines how meanings relating to death and the dead are made, reiterated, challenged and negotiated in late postmodern culture with a focus on both interpretation and critical evaluation and a significant element of subjectivity. As Small points out, in the humanities a critical reading of such broad terms as culture and the subject are common. Despite examining the term ‘subjectivity’ in detail in chapter three the complexity of the term ‘culture’ is not directly addressed here. Striphas has pointed out that foundational terms like ‘culture’ are particularly difficult “because they are so close, so vital, so essential, they tend to resist sustained critical scrutiny.”<sup>72</sup> He calls for a return to close analysis of the term in cultural studies. There is not the space to engage in a sustained examination of it here. However, a detailed definition of what is meant by ‘late postmodern culture’ is provided in chapter one.

Within the humanities, there are a vast range of different approaches aligned with specific disciplines. The approach here is one most closely aligned with literary criticism, cultural and critical theory, and, as the title suggests, with postmodernist approaches. A postmodernist approach that recognises a multiplicity of potential meanings is arguably sympathetic to an interdisciplinary one. Postmodernism’s high tolerance for difference, contradiction and multiple narratives make it compatible with an approach that must be conscious of the risk of ‘whitewashing’ disciplinary, intellectual and methodological differences as well as differences in genre. A consideration of the accusations of postmodernism’s failure to acknowledge these kinds of differences and tendency toward extreme cultural relativism is given in chapter one. Postmodernism itself also has interdisciplinary contours. Jeremy Green suggests that “the bewildering variety of meanings attached to postmodernism is a measure of the term’s success: the word has operated like a virus, crossing disciplinary borders and infecting seemingly discrete bodies of thought.”<sup>73</sup> Linda Hutcheon has asserted that while postmodernism arguably “has no affective theory of agency that enables a move into political *action*,” an argument to some

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<sup>71</sup> Small, *The Value of the Humanities*, 23.

<sup>72</sup> Striphas, “Caring for Cultural Studies,” 6.

<sup>73</sup> Jeremy Green, *Late Postmodernism: American Fiction at the Millennium* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), 1.

extent contested in chapter one, “it does work to turn its inevitable ideological grounding into a site of de-naturalizing critique.”<sup>74</sup> A de-naturalising critique is applied in this thesis in relation to the literary, visual, academic and theoretical texts examined as well as to culture more broadly, not least in order to challenge the ingrained notion of death denial. In this sense, the thesis takes a broad approach to the term text and seeks to ‘read’ meanings into culture as a whole. Donald Hall has pointed out that “literary and cultural critics have aggressively expanded what they mean by the term text,” understanding a range of material culture, new media, the body and indeed the self as texts to be read.<sup>75</sup> Despite this, there is a tendency in even the broadest conceptions of the text to position academic work as somehow ‘outside’ of culture. Throughout the thesis it is emphasised that theory and academic texts are read as a part of culture alongside autobiography, art and television, as having their own role to play in the perception, rendering and reproduction of ideas and positions. As Alan Sinfield points out, all “cultural production produces concepts, systems and apparently ‘natural’ understanding to explain who we are individually and collectively, who the others are, how the world works.”<sup>76</sup> It is because of this that broad studies can offer valuable insights.

Postmodernism is closely aligned with poststructuralism and deconstruction and at times these different terms and their meanings are conflated. Poststructuralist ideas about language and the self are explored in chapter three in relation to the concept of the ‘death of the self.’ Deconstruction, according to Neil Badmington, seeks “to expose the overwhelming uncertainty of even the most apparently certain discourses.”<sup>77</sup> It is notoriously hard to define. Nicholas Royle’s ‘What is Deconstruction?’ offers an excellent examination of the term.<sup>78</sup> Among the definitions offered by Royle is Bennington’s multi-layered one liner: “deconstruction is not what you think.”<sup>79</sup> Deconstruction has been heavily associated with literary theory, but Royle challenges the idea that deconstruction is a textual method or that it is something that can be contained in the realm of philosophy or literary theory. Instead, he insists that it is about more than most dictionary definitions

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<sup>74</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 3.

<sup>75</sup> Donald E. Hall, *Subjectivity* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2004), 5.

<sup>76</sup> Alan Sinfield, *Literature, Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain* (London and New York: Continuum, 1997), 29.

<sup>77</sup> Neil Badmington, “Theorizing Posthumanism,” *Cultural Critique* 53 (2003): 16.

<sup>78</sup> Nicholas Royle, “What is deconstruction?,” in *Deconstructions: A user’s guide*, ed. Nicholas Royle (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000), 12.

<sup>79</sup> Geoffrey Bennington, “Deconstruction is not what you think,” in *Deconstructionist Omnibus Volume*, eds. Andreas Papadakis, Catherine Cooke and Andrew Benjamin (London: Academy Edition, 1989), 84.

would ever be able to tolerate – pertaining to experience, identity, difference and the making of worlds. Macey states, however, that “deconstruction has had an immense influence on literary studies,” though more so in English speaking countries than in France, from where its central figure, Jacques Derrida, hailed.<sup>80</sup> Deconstruction has also been central to postcolonialism and queer theory. Yet as David Macey points out, the “practitioners of deconstruction insist that it is not a ‘theory’ or ‘philosophy’ that can be applied, or even one that can be defined as a set of propositions.”<sup>81</sup>

Paul de Man argues that deconstruction is not something you do to the text but something the text does to itself, emphasising both how difficult it is to define deconstruction as a practice and the importance of a focus on the text to deconstruction.<sup>82</sup> Blind-spots exist in all texts and deconstruction aims to expose them, undoing the unacknowledged assumptions they contain within them and identifying, as Chris Barker notes, aporia – “places where a text’s rhetorical strategies work against the logic of its own arguments.”<sup>83</sup> Though close reading practices are applied to texts throughout this thesis and the research is aligned with postmodernist theories and deconstruction, the approach taken differs from what some would argue is a purely deconstructionist one in a number of ways. Rather than focusing only on individual texts, the thesis seeks to examine how the readings of a range of texts taken individually and together can inform understandings of culture more broadly. Moreover, it explores how a reading of them alongside social, cultural, critical and psychoanalytic theory (in particular theory relating to postmodernism, capitalism, loss and mourning) can support an understanding of the ways in which death and the dead are positioned in late postmodern culture. Close attention is also paid to the differences between texts and genres in a way that purely deconstructionist approaches are often accused (perhaps wrongly) of failing to do. One of the central misunderstandings of deconstruction can arguably be seen in criticisms that position it as maintaining an unrelenting focus on the minutiae of the text at the expense of context.

Macey writes that “all forms of deconstruction rely upon extremely close readings of the texts under analysis and tend to refrain from introducing external evaluative criteria.”<sup>84</sup> Valentine Cunningham has critiqued deconstructionists’ supposed declarations

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<sup>80</sup> David Macey, *Dictionary of Critical Theory* (London: Penguin, 2001), 85.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>82</sup> Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979).

<sup>83</sup> Chris Barker, *Cultural Studies: Theory and Practice*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (London: Sage, 2012), 88.

<sup>84</sup> Macey, *Dictionary*, 86.

that they are “interested mainly, or only, in the text itself: in the text’s internalized and ever imploding selfhood,” interpreting this as an orthodoxy “opposed to that idea of content, the world, the signified.”<sup>85</sup> “It has always been a tricky operation,” he writes, “to split signs away from referents, words on the page (or in the mouth, in the ear, in the head) from meanings out there in the world.”<sup>86</sup> Yet this view is arguably one grounded in a misreading of Derrida’s famous phrase “[i]l n’y a pas de hors-texte,” often translated as “there is nothing outside the text,” which some argue is better translated as “[t]here is no outside-text.”<sup>87</sup> As Alex Callinicos has pointed out, it is unlikely Derrida intended to “deny the existence of extra-discursive objects” or imply that there is no ‘reality’ outside of the text, to suggest that only the text was of concern or to indicate that anything could be a text (all ways in which this phrase has been interpreted).<sup>88</sup> Rather, he emphasises that unmediated, direct or uncomplicated access to understanding of the world outside of the text was just as unachievable as unmediated, direct or uncomplicated access to understanding of the text itself. As Cunningham himself notes, Derrida adhered to the idea that “analyses are always made in history.”<sup>89</sup> Derrida made this clear when he responded to the frequent adoption of the phrase “[i]l n’y a pas de hors-texte” by stating that it had been “badly understood.”<sup>90</sup> He clarified that it meant that “there is nothing outside context” and that “the text is not the book.”<sup>91</sup> The text is boundless, its interpretations and reinterpretations in different (con)texts almost innumerable – “no meaning can be determined out of context, but no context permits saturation.”<sup>92</sup> Yet in interdisciplinary endeavours and the convergence of theory and cultural practice, ideas about deconstruction have become diluted as they have been applied. Often, deconstruction has come to be understood more broadly as the practice of close reading, teasing out assumptions or undertaking de-naturalising critique, all of which are practices undertaken in this thesis.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Valentine Cunningham, “Renoving that Bible: The Absolute Text of (Post) Modernism,” in *The Theory of Reading*, ed. Frank Gloversmith (Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1984), 2.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> For a discussion of the different translations of the phrase see Arthur Bradley, *Derrida’s Of Grammatology: An Edinburgh Philosophical Guide* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 143.

<sup>88</sup> Alex Callinicos, *Against Postmodernism: A Marxist Critique* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989), 76.

<sup>89</sup> Cunningham, “Renoving that Bible,” 49.

<sup>90</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc*, trans. Samuel Weber (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 136-137.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Living on: Borderlines,” trans. James Hulbert in *Deconstruction and Criticism*, ed. Harold Bloom (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), 67.

<sup>93</sup> See, for example, this widely available definition by American public broadcasting service PBS, which defines deconstruction more broadly as a challenge to truth claims and dominant ideologies: PBS, “Deconstructionism,” accessed February 23, 2019, <https://www.pbs.org/faithandreason/gengloss/decon-body.html>



Another criticism levelled against deconstruction is that it makes “little or no distinction [...] between genres: philosophical texts are to be analysed in the same terms as literary texts.”<sup>94</sup> This, too, is perhaps a misleading criticism. Derrida emphasises that the aim of deconstruction was not to dissolve all boundaries but “to work out the theoretical and practical systems of these margins, these borders, once more, from the ground up.”<sup>95</sup> He writes that there has been “a sort of overrun” of “all those boundaries that form the running border of what used to be called a text,” or “of what we once thought this word could identify, i.e., the supposed end and beginning of a work, the unity of a corpus, the title, the margins, the signatures, the referential realm outside the frame.”<sup>96</sup> A text is perhaps now better understood as “a differential network, a fabric of traces referring endlessly to something other than itself.”<sup>97</sup> This notion is examined in relation to autobiography in chapter four. Understanding that texts overrun “all the limits assigned” to them does not lead to “submerging or drowning them in an undifferentiated homogeneity, but rather” makes them “more complex.”<sup>98</sup> As mentioned earlier, a broad definition of the term text is adopted in this thesis. A breadth of examples is utilised from different genres and media in examining engagement with death and the dead in what is defined here as late postmodern culture. Autobiographical writing and televisual narratives take centre stage but are considered alongside theory and art as well as examples from popular culture, and some examples that are more difficult to classify. The ways in which the ideas contained within texts ‘overrun’ them are explored.

A focus on the interpretation and critical evaluation of meaning-making practices through theories associated with postmodernism is central to the positioning of this thesis as one taking a humanities approach. However, the most immediate indication that a humanities approach is being adopted is visible in the structure of the thesis. This is because it does not adhere to the structure currently dominant in a wide range of disciplines, in doctoral training programmes and thesis guidance. Similarly, the referencing style of footnotes and approach to quotation are both visible signs of a humanities approach, given that the frequent embedding of quotations is typically deemed part of a critical style in the arts and humanities. In terms of approaching texts, much literary and cultural analysis emerging from the humanities, in particular when utilising postmodernist

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<sup>94</sup> Macey, *Dictionary of Critical Theory*, 86.

<sup>95</sup> Derrida, “Living on,” 67.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*

theory, is not consignable to an exact interpretative paradigm. Browne and Nash have pointed out that queer researchers along with poststructuralist, postmodernist, feminist and postcolonial scholars tend to consciously “articulate their ontologies and epistemologies” but are “less inclined to consider the implications of these approaches to methodologies and methods,” or at least to include these considerations in the structures of their written work.<sup>99</sup> This is perhaps because research adopting such strategies is often not seeking to interpret texts, culture or the objects of their research through one particular framework but rather to ‘open them up’ to readings and multiple possible meanings. It may also be because the emphasis on acknowledging subjectivity that is present in many, but not all, humanities disciplines renders the notion of being able to replicate research particularly challenging.

In chapter one it is pointed out that an impulse to take a unified approach to the analysis of texts or culture more broadly can be accused of adhering to modernist or Enlightenment ideals deemed by many postmodernists to be problematic. There seems also to be a tendency in critical and cultural theory for syncretic readings to form a part of the originality of the work, as researchers refine their own theoretical understandings and approaches through engagement with others in their writing. In adopting this kind of approach it is necessary to be comfortable with the uncomfortable, with work that remains, as Browne and Nash put it, “riddled with questions and uncertainties,” rather than seeking to attempt to assert a unity between theorists and ideas.<sup>100</sup> Similarly, it is important to acknowledge that theory itself, as Colin Davis points out, “rather than imposing its own authority definitively [...] is engaged in a quest for understanding which is interminable because it can never occupy a final, assured position.”<sup>101</sup> This kind of approach might be perceived as incompatible with the need to present an original contribution to knowledge within a doctoral thesis. However, efforts are made throughout this thesis to demonstrate that this is not the case and a summary of the original contributions to knowledge offered in this thesis is provided at the conclusion.

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<sup>99</sup> Katherine Nash and Cath Browne, “Introduction,” in *Queer Methods and Methodologies: Intersecting Queer Theories and Social Science Research*, eds. Katherine Nash and Cath Browne (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2010), 1.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>101</sup> Colin Davis, *After Poststructuralism: Reading, Stories and Theory* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 4.

According to Bullough, interdisciplinarity itself can be understood as a method of analysis, “given its generative promise, the promise of fresh insight, of new metaphors and models for making meaning.”<sup>102</sup> In interdisciplinary and humanities research, it is both possible and productive to reject a defined approach in favour of an assemblage of approaches. Sara Ahmed states that “it matters, how we assemble things, how we put things together,” pointing out that the personal “archives” of our research “are assembled out of encounters, taking form as a memory trace of where we have been.”<sup>103</sup> As such, “my archive is also my world, my life-world, my past as well as my present.”<sup>104</sup> This speaks to the importance of interdisciplinary infrastructures, as interdisciplinary encounters (through online networks, conferences, book series and more) offer opportunities to expand personal archives in terms of reading, ideas, perspectives and methods. This thesis offers a critical reading of texts that seeks to interpret them alongside, with and through theory whilst also acknowledging the ways in which they are already themselves products and vehicles of meaning, emerging out of and always gesturing toward the broader sociocultural contexts in which they came to be. As Terry Eagleton emphasises, “literary works are not mysteriously inspired, or explicable simply in terms of their authors’ psychology.”<sup>105</sup> No film, television series, media report, or academic output is the product of an isolated consciousness operating in a vacuum.

All texts reflect, mediate and complicate “forms of perception, particular ways of seeing the world; and as such they have a relation to that dominant way of seeing the world which is the ‘social mentality’ or ideology of an age.”<sup>106</sup> Late postmodern culture is positioned here as a context in which texts emerge, and one texts contribute to, challenge and negotiate. As Sinfield has argued, “the network of stories in which we live and which constructs our world has been made by us in history and society, and may be remade.”<sup>107</sup> Throughout this thesis, ways in which culture produces, incorporates, amplifies, marginalises and challenges a range of different stories, narratives and ideas about death and the dead at different moments and junctures are examined. The epigraph to this chapter emphasises the ways in which humans are engaged in a process of world-making, drawing on available cultural resources. Consequently, “with every death, a world

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<sup>102</sup> Bullough, “Developing Interdisciplinary Researchers,” 4.

<sup>103</sup> Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 19.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Marxism and Literary Criticism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 6.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Sinfield, *Literature, Politics and Culture*, 167.

disappears.”<sup>108</sup> In chapter three in particular, the importance of narrative to cultural understandings is examined. It is argued that understandings of the self as narrative have contributed to the increasing prevalence of autobiographical and fictional accounts about death and the dead in late postmodern culture.

The analysis here is both theoretical and textual, examining the ways that theory can inform understandings of cultural texts and the ways that cultural texts can inform understandings of theory. In taking this approach, some of the tensions that exist between cultural studies and theory are challenged. Davis has argued that “there is undoubtedly an element of simplification in the opposition between theory and cultural studies, partly because it obscures the extent to which cultural studies grew out of and is informed by debates in theory.”<sup>109</sup> Butler too points out the ways in which the antagonisms between theory and cultural studies sometimes fail to recognise how “the face of theory has changed precisely through its cultural appropriations. There is a new venue for theory, necessarily impure, where it emerges in and as the very event of cultural translation.”<sup>110</sup> This is “the emergence of theory at the site where cultural horizons meet, where the demand for translation is acute and its promise of success, uncertain.”<sup>111</sup> Theory is often accused of leaving “no place for ‘practice’ and no conceivable application to the world which common sense tells us we inhabit.”<sup>112</sup> The Sokal and recent Sokal Squared affairs are ample evidence of this.<sup>113</sup> Yet as chapter one argues with reference to Davis, “theory emerges out of the possibly deluded project of making sense of ourselves and others.”<sup>114</sup> Though ‘success’ is unlikely ever to be achieved (meaning, in a deconstructionist sense, is always beyond us), the process of seeking to ‘make sense’ can be informative, elucidating and valuable.

Processes of ‘making sense’ are a primary concern here. Throughout, the approach taken can be understood as one in which sense making and attempts to ‘make sense’ are under scrutiny. The thesis examines the ways in which recent engagement with death and

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<sup>108</sup> Bauman in Jacobsen, “Sociology, mortality and solidarity,” 388.

<sup>109</sup> Davis, *After Poststructuralism*, 3.

<sup>110</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, ix-x.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Davis, *After Poststructuralism*, 1.

<sup>113</sup> See Davis, *After Poststructuralism* for an overview of the Sokal affair and Striplas, “Caring for Cultural Studies” for an overview of Sokal Squared.

<sup>114</sup> Davis, *After Poststructuralism*, 177.

the dead 'makes sense' in light of the confluence of capitalism and postmodernism. It explores the ways in which culture seeks to 'make sense' of death and the ways in which it is possible to 'make sense' of a range of contemporary concerns through engagement with death (in particular ideas about the self, others and the past). It also examines the ways in which interdisciplinary work can contribute to and complicate processes of sense making in fruitful ways. In this regard, an attempt is made not only to champion the place of the humanities in death studies, but also the place of theory in 'making sense' of culture. Churchwell argues that "the humanities are where we locate our own lives, our own meanings."<sup>115</sup> Les Back has pointed out that for him, it is sociology that "provided a way to make sense of some of the things that [he] experienced as a young person."<sup>116</sup> Such a broad undertaking as seeking to 'make sense' is perhaps an inevitably interdisciplinary, as well as theoretical, endeavour.

### **Periodisation and generalisation**

Chapter one sets out a notion of the current milieu or *zeitgeist* that is to some extent periodising. Douglas Davies has pointed out that "it is tempting to divide time into eras and argue for different kinds of consciousness of death in each."<sup>117</sup> Doing so, however, can mean failing to acknowledge the extent to which sociocultural contexts are always conflict ridden and home to contradictory and complicated experiences, viewpoints and attitudes. The tendency to oversimplify in identifying different attitudes to death in different periodisations has been a key criticism of work adhering to the death denial thesis examined in chapter two. As Zygmunt Bauman has argued, "we do not live, after all, once in a premodern, once in a modern, once in a postmodern world. All three 'worlds' are but abstract idealizations of mutually incoherent aspects of the single life-process which we all try our best to make as coherent as we can manage."<sup>118</sup> Here Bauman suggests that the complex process of 'making sense' of experience is central to the self. However, Donald Hall argues that, despite the limitations of periodising impulses, "it is still important to recognise that change does occur over time, and that there have been dramatic shifts in socio-political contexts and consciousness."<sup>119</sup> These shifts justify, he argues, a "self-aware

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<sup>115</sup> Sarah Churchwell, "why the humanities matter," *Times Higher Education*, November 13, 2014, <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/comment/opinion/sarah-churchwell-why-the-humanities-matter/2016909.article>

<sup>116</sup> Les Back, *Academic Diary: Or Why Higher Education Still Matters* (London: Goldsmiths Press, 2016), 167.

<sup>117</sup> Douglas Davies, *A Brief History of Death* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 2.

<sup>118</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Mortality, Immortality and Other Life Strategies* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), 11.

<sup>119</sup> Hall, *Subjectivity*, 16.

use of historical periodization, as an attempt to understand our past, present and possible futures.”<sup>120</sup> Hall highlights that backwardly projecting categories such as medieval and renaissance are inherently reductive and acknowledges the risk of them being utilised over-rigidly. The same certainly goes for attempts to draw conclusions about or give a moniker to the present. No periodisation can “fully capture the ways that shifts in social organisation and belief systems are gradual, halting, and experienced differently among classes, genders, and regions.”<sup>121</sup> Yet, there is value in what Lauren Berlant has referred to as “conceiving of a contemporary moment within that moment” in order to develop understandings and interpretations.<sup>122</sup> As Michael Hviid Jacobsen has suggested, “we need to locate and interpret death in its historical, social and cultural circumstances in order to understand the impact of death in human life.”<sup>123</sup> This kind of activity, according to Berlant, is profoundly political, because it involves “managing simultaneous, incoherent narratives of what’s going on.”<sup>124</sup> The practises of emphasis, exclusion and inclusion involved in telling the story of the present and of cultural responses to death and the dead are revealing. In that sense the writing in this thesis (like all writing from a deconstructionist perspective) will at times reveal and undo itself.

The spatialising and typologising generalisation ‘western’ is also utilised at times. Kwame Anthony Appiah has argued that we “should give up the very idea of Western civilization. It’s at best the source of a great deal of confusion, at worst an obstacle to facing some of the great political challenges of our time.”<sup>125</sup> The term appears in the thesis in direct quotations from other authors and is utilised at times in chapters one, two and three because, as a contested idea, it remains central to understanding the particular notions of both death denial and the self discussed in those chapters. As Stuart Hall has pointed out in his seminal examination of the idea of the west, at times “we have to use short-hand generalizations, like ‘West’ and ‘western’, but we need to remember that they represent very complex ideas and have no simple or single meaning.”<sup>126</sup> As a way of

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2011), 4.

<sup>123</sup> Michael Hviid Jacobsen, “Spectacular Death” – Proposing a New Fifth Phase to Philippe Ariès’s Admirable History of Death,” *Humanities* 5.19 (2016): 2, doi: 10.3390/h5020019

<sup>124</sup> Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 4.

<sup>125</sup> Kwame Anthony Appiah, “Mistaken Identities: Creed, Country, Color, Culture,” *Reith Lectures*, November 12, 2016, accessed June 21, 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b081lkkj>

<sup>126</sup> Stuart Hall, “The West and the Rest: discourse and power,” in *Formations of modernity* eds. Stuart Hall and Bram Bieben (Oxford: Polity Press, 1992), 276.

acknowledging how the expressions west and western function ideologically and are imbricated in the privileging of certain cultures over others, the choice has been made not to capitalise them (unless referring to a specific geographical designation such as Western Europe). Some authors usefully place the west in single quotation marks to emphasise that the idea of the west is a construction, and importantly a contested one. The choice has been made not to do this here given that the deconstructionist and postmodernist approaches adopted in the thesis position and acknowledge many of the ideas under consideration here as constructed and contested, in particular, for example, the notions of death denial considered in chapter two and of the self considered in chapter three. A consideration of how the terms west and western are understood within this thesis (and what they might mean when they appear in the work of authors cited here) is provided below.

As Appiah emphasises, the expression the west has been used “to do many different jobs” and this is in part why the idea is so complex, escaping concrete meaning.<sup>127</sup> Appiah explains how all of Europe has been positioned as the west and contrasted with Asia, with no reference to the remainder of the world. He considers how during the Cold War, the west was one side of the Iron Curtain with the other side, in many discourses, framed as the enemy – again with no attention paid to those countries and continents left unconsidered. Appiah suggests that in recent years what is most typically meant by the west is “the North Atlantic: Europe and her former colonies in North America.”<sup>128</sup> Geographically this understanding seems also to be that adopted in a number of the texts considered here. In chapter two, for example, the text *Western Attitudes Toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present* by Phillipe Ariès in its title makes clear a focus on the west. Though, like many of the academic and theoretical texts considered in this thesis, it does not define explicitly what is meant by the west, it can be assumed from the text’s content that Western Europe in particular is at the fore of the definition. Ariès has also been reported to say that it was the “culture of the United States which had played a primordial role in changing Western attitudes toward death in the twentieth century,” demonstrating that he too considers the United States of America to have become a

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<sup>127</sup> Kwame Anthony Appiah, “Mistaken Identities: Creed, Country, Color, Culture,” *Reith Lectures*, November 12, 2016, accessed June 21, 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b081lkkj>

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

central example of the west.<sup>129</sup> For some, however, the west may function in terms of geography to refer to only Western Europe.<sup>130</sup>

Even within the texts discussed in chapter two, disagreements emerge about what constitutes the west in geographical terms. For example, Dina Khapaeva's work on death designates Russia as a western country,<sup>131</sup> yet Russia is often not included under the moniker and is the subject of controversy in discussions over what should be deemed western.<sup>132</sup> In Hall's analysis of the discourses of the 'West and the Rest' he makes clear that both sides of this coin are "historical and linguistic constructs whose meanings change over time."<sup>133</sup> However, a focus here on what "the Rest" is might sharpen an understanding of the idea of what the west is. For Hall, the discourse of the 'West and the Rest' can help to clarify the ways in which the "so-called uniqueness of the West was, in part, produced by Europe's contact and self-comparison with other, non-western societies (the Rest)."<sup>134</sup> In this sense, the west as an idea was developed through its perceived difference to countries and cultures with different "histories, ecologies, patterns of development and cultures from the European model."<sup>135</sup> Whilst pointing out the risks of such simplification (simplification being exactly what the terms west and western themselves do) Hall consigns to "the Rest" the Middle East, the Far East, Africa, Latin America, indigenous North America and Australia.<sup>136</sup>

Appiah positions the following as not included within definitions of the west: Africa, Asia and Latin America. However, he notes that "many in Latin America will claim a Western inheritance, too."<sup>137</sup> Many critical studies of culture now adopt the terms Global South and Global North when thinking about the geography of the world in this way, or

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<sup>129</sup> Orest Ranum, "preface," in Phillipe Ariès, *Western Attitudes Toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present*, trans. Patricia M. Ranum (London and New York: Marion Boyars, 1976), x.

<sup>130</sup> See, for example, Arun Kumar Pokhrel, "Eurocentrism," in *Encyclopedia of Global Justice*, ed. Deen K. Chatterjee (Dordrecht: Springer, 2011), doi: 10.1007/978-1-4020-9160-5\_25

<sup>131</sup> Dina Khapaeva, *The Celebration of Death in Contemporary Culture* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017).

<sup>132</sup> See for example Huntington, who deems Russia one of a number of 'swing civilizations.' Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order* (London: Simon and Schuster, 1996).

<sup>133</sup> Hall, "The West and the Rest: discourse and power," 279.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 278.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 279.

<sup>137</sup> Kwame Anthony Appiah, "Mistaken Identities: Creed, Country, Color, Culture," *Reith Lectures*, November 12, 2016, accessed June 21, 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b081lkkj>



position the west as a synonym for the industrialised societies of the Global North.<sup>138</sup> These terms are also fraught, given that they too are constructions that designate vast swathes of the world as one or the other without being able to account for internal difference, and because there is no clear agreement on where the borders of each country, themselves shifting and constructed, might sit within these designations. Appiah emphasises that another significant risk in thinking of the idea of the Global South is that it “lumps a whole lot of extremely different societies together, while delicately carving around Australians and New Zealanders and white South Africans, so that ‘western’ here can look simply like a euphemism for white.”<sup>139</sup> According to Appiah, in recent years the west has also been increasingly defined in opposition not to the Global South but to the “Muslim world” (an especially charged and complicated notion in and of itself).<sup>140</sup> Appiah also draws attention to the prevalence of debates in Europe and America over whether western culture is fundamentally a Christian inheritance. Evidently, there is much that might be debated in any definition of the west and, as Hall emphasises, ideas about where and what the west is are especially “puzzling.”<sup>141</sup> They are tied to complex historical, global, political and cultural circumstances.

In contrast to thinking of the west in purely geographical terms, it is perhaps more useful to consider the west more broadly as an ideological idea. Hall emphasises that notions of the west “have never been free of myth and fantasy” and are “not primarily ideas about place and geography.”<sup>142</sup> Though there is no simple way of understanding these expressions in either geographical or non-geographical terms, thinking of the west and the notion of being western as an idea can help to understand the varied ways in which these ideas are used and why the expressions are so powerful. Hall explores how the notion of the west is used to classify and categorise, as an image or system of representation that “condenses a number of different characteristics into one picture,” a model for comparison to explain difference and a criteria for evaluation (these all being

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<sup>138</sup> Nour Dados and Raewyn Connell, “The Global South,” *Contexts*, 11.1 (2012), doi: 10.1177/1536504212436479. In chapter one this thesis adopts the term Global South when considering the politics of production and consumption in the twenty-first century, as it seems there to be the most accurate if imprecise way to acknowledge shifts in global production chains.

<sup>139</sup> Kwame Anthony Appiah, “Mistaken Identities: Creed, Country, Color, Culture,” *Reith Lectures*, November 12, 2016, accessed June 21, 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b081lkkj>

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> Hall, ‘The West and the Rest,’ 276.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

especially evident in the discourse of the 'West and the Rest' that he identifies).<sup>143</sup> In this sense, the terms west and western are highly contextual, and their meaning is not fixed. Though from a deconstructionist point of view this is perhaps true of all language, the terms west and western have heightened significance because they have functioned ideologically in especially powerful ways, tied to ideas about beliefs, values, and notions of superiority/inferiority that have impacted global decision making and may also be felt in individual experience. When utilised first-hand in the thesis, the terms west and western are intended to indicate an ideological notion of the west as an idea or concept that has, if no concrete meaning, certainly concrete generalising and typologising effects. However, it is an idea that is fluid, context specific and highly contested. It is also important to note that usage of the terms west and western in this thesis may mean different things when embedded within direct quotes. This is partly because each author will have their own understanding of the expression and partly because, as a shifting idea, the notion of the west might have had quite different meanings for authors writing in the past, or writing from within different localities and cultures.

Efforts are also made throughout this thesis to acknowledge that there is and never has been a monolithic western culture. Within the constructed borders of any one country alone, myriad cultures can thrive. Culture itself is a term loaded with complex and competing meanings. As stated above, the phrase late postmodern culture runs the risk of perpetuating the notion of an all-encompassing cultural norm. Chapter one seeks to position the term late postmodern culture as one that acknowledges the inevitability of immeasurable cultural difference. However, it also argues that a range of political, technological, commercial and theoretical influences have led to a set of conditions which can both be understood as informing and informed by the cultural texts examined here, and which produce a hospitable environment for engagement with death and the dead.

In terms of the positioning of the texts that form the focus of this thesis, the three authors whose autobiographical reflections on death are examined in chapter four are English. Two of the television series examined in chapter five are English, with the third a French television series that has also been subtitled into English and broadcast on the BBC. The theoretical frameworks constructed in chapter one draw primarily on the work of

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<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 277.

Frederic Jameson, Jeffrey. T Nealon and Mark Fisher. Jameson and Nealon are from the United States of America, Fisher from England. Algerian-born French philosopher Jacques Derrida is central to arguments about hospitality put forward in this thesis, and a range of other French thinkers central to postmodernism and deconstruction are also considered.<sup>144</sup> Though caution should be exercised in seeking to define how another might seek to position their own identities as producers of any work, the texts that underpin and are the objects of analysis in this thesis can be understood as western both in terms of geography and broader definitions of the term, especially given many of them are explicitly concerned with particular notions of death denial, of the self, and of what Hall calls the “very European affair” of the Enlightenment, that are tied to the idea of the west.<sup>145</sup> The terms postmodernism and deconstruction are themselves also likely to be understood as ones imbricated in a range of shifting understandings of what the west is, related in particular to notions of political pluralism and, more recently, neoliberalism, as will be discussed in chapter one.

### **Thesis structure**

The introduction has explained the positioning of this thesis in terms of field and discipline and has outlined the research approach. Chapter one defines the term late postmodern culture and sets out the ways in which death and the dead are integral to late postmodern culture. It asserts that the confluence of capitalism and postmodernism in their late stages have made a hospitable environment for engagement with death and the dead and develops a definition of late postmodern culture that acknowledges the importance of capitalism, death and the dead to it. Chapter two engages with and challenges the argument that death is denied in western culture. It argues that much of the engagement with death and the dead that can be found throughout late postmodern culture continues to be justified in relation to a broader context of death denial and asserts that the positioning of death as denied and taboo in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries has directly facilitated the commodification of death in the same period. Chapter three argues that one of the reasons for the increased presence of the dead around us in late postmodern culture is the particular primacy of the self, as a focus on the individual and on a constructed, rather than inherent, self has opened up opportunities for extending

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<sup>144</sup> For a discussion of the effects of Derrida’s upbringing in Algeria on his work, see Pal Ahluwalia, “Origins and Displacement: Working Through Derrida’s African Connections,” *Social Identities*, 13:3 (2017), doi: 10.1080/13504630701363960

<sup>145</sup> Hall, “The West and the Rest,” 278.

that construction into death. The importance of narrative in terms of 'making sense' of life, death and the self are examined. Chapter four provides an analysis of autobiographical engagement with death and the dead by three prominent literary figures, exploring how both death and the self are written in late postmodern culture. The term autothanatography is adopted to explore texts by Julian Barnes, Jenny Diski and Will Self. Chapter five focuses on the return of the dead in visual media and examines three televisual narratives that bring back the dead, not as zombies, vampires or ghosts, but as themselves. Chapters four and five emphasise the ways in which the texts considered there can be 'made sense' of in relation to and alongside theoretical ideas about death, the self, and the responsibility of the living toward the dead. The conclusion reiterates and reaffirms the approach taken and arguments made throughout the thesis with the help of some recent examples and summarises where original contributions to knowledge might be found.

## Chapter One: Late Postmodern Culture

*Theory emerges out of the possibly deluded project of making sense of ourselves and others. It is haunted, and driven, by the inevitability of its failure and the necessity of carrying on.*

Colin Davis<sup>1</sup>

This chapter defines the term late postmodern culture and justifies its use throughout the thesis. It argues that death is integral to late postmodernity, embedded in myriad ways within its structures. It begins by examining the ways in which postmodernism/postmodernity (a distinction explored later on) can be competingly understood as the demise of the metanarrative; the defeat of the left; as the cultural logic of a consumer capitalism sustained in part by the inbuilt obsolescence of its products; a cultural milieu in which death is sequestered and denied; a theoretical shift marked by 'the death of the subject;' a period of 'lateness' and melancholy that anticipates a vague but impending end and, finally, as already dead itself. The chapter explores the tensions and similarities that emerge within and between different understandings of postmodernism and postmodernity broadly aligned under the disciplinary umbrellas of the humanities and social sciences and considers different terms that have emerged in recent years to delineate a break with the postmodern. The term late postmodern culture is situated in relation to the legacy of Frederic Jameson's work on postmodernism as the cultural logic of late capitalism, as well as Jeffrey T. Nealon's work on post-postmodernism and Mark Fisher's conception of capitalist realism. The term is positioned as a useful one for helping to 'make sense' of the place of death and the dead in the current milieu, in particular arguing that the confluence of postmodernism and capitalism in their late stages have created a hospitable environment for engagement with death and the dead.

### Postmodernism: from celebration to melancholy

In 1971 Jameson argued that the shift toward the service economy in the west in the late twentieth century, a shift thoroughly cemented in the early twenty-first century with arguably global reach, had the psychological implication of extricating subjects from the "realities of production and work" to the extent that "we inhabit a dream world of artificial stimuli and televised experience."<sup>2</sup> Clearly this statement is problematic given there is ample evidence that many individuals in the west fully realise the often grim realities of production and work (or lack thereof). However, it does offer a clear example of the ways in which Jameson's observations about postmodernity have 'aged well.' If this statement rang true in 1971, and the critical reception of Jameson's work at the time suggests it did, it has significantly greater weight under the cultural conditions of the twenty-first century, both

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<sup>1</sup> Davis, *After Poststructuralism*, 177.

<sup>2</sup> Frederic Jameson, *Marxism and Form* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), xviii.

dependent on and defined by consumption and characterised by the ubiquity of screen cultures and artificial experiences, with the “realities of production and work” that facilitate these experiences predominantly felt in the Global South.<sup>3</sup> “Never in any previous civilization,” writes Jameson, “have the great metaphysical preoccupations, the fundamental questions of being and of the meaning of life, seemed so utterly remote and pointless.”<sup>4</sup> Jameson exhibits a melancholy wistfulness for what he interprets as the concerns of past societies with questions of life, death and meaning. His position, in this sense, is very similar to that of the proponents of the death denial thesis examined in chapter two, who see western culture as having shifted from one of engagement with death toward one of denial and the sequestration of death during the twentieth century. He holds the material conditions of late capitalism accountable for the nullification of existential or spiritual questioning. In his 1991 *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* he fully realises his periodisation of postmodernism as a cultural turn embedded in material and specifically economic conditions, positioning postmodernism as intricately tied to the development of capitalism. Benjamin Kundel argues that Jameson has “succeeded better than anyone else at defining the term, ‘postmodernism,’ that sought to catch the historical specificity of the present age.”<sup>5</sup> Much of Jameson’s conceptualisation of postmodernism remains useful. However, this thesis also argues that there is significant engagement with death and the dead in late postmodern culture, a milieu at times seemingly characterised by an exhausted sense of pointlessness, but at others by the vitality of philosophical, ethical and existential questioning.

Jameson’s 1971 analysis of the melancholic contours of what he would come to define as the postmodern experience is also indicative, or perhaps prescient, of the shift in critical debates around postmodernism that occurred in the run up to the 1990s. Jameson seems always to have understood postmodernism as melancholy, taking a critical stance toward it from the start and describing it as “demoralising and depressing.”<sup>6</sup> However, for many postmodernism was considered a cause for celebration. This was owing to a range of its features including eclecticism, the rejection of elitism and categories of high and low art, the embracing of difference and contradiction, playfulness, subversiveness and irony, and a critical stance toward the project of the Enlightenment. Any such celebration was, however, short lived. Perry Anderson draws on Jean-François Lyotard’s

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Benjamin Kundel, "Into the Big Tent," *London Review of Books* 32.8, April 22, 2010: 12, accessed June 21, 2020, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v32/n08/benjamin-kundel/into-the-big-tent>

<sup>6</sup> Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 49.

1993 *Moralités Postmodernes*<sup>7</sup> to establish that by the 1990s, “gone was the ‘jubilation’ of the initial breakage of representation by the postmodern.”<sup>8</sup> Instead, “an invincible malaise now defined the tone of the time” and by the 1990s, “the postmodern was ‘melancholy’.”<sup>9</sup> Though Lyotard’s 1979 *The Postmodern Condition* was both in “title and topic” the “first book to treat postmodernity as a general change of human circumstance,” it is not, according to Anderson or Bennington, representative of Lyotard’s intellectual position on postmodernity.<sup>10</sup> Anderson emphasises that in his later works Lyotard recovered a revolutionary tone in his condemnation of global inequality, undermining any celebratory interpretation of the postmodern that might be derived from *The Postmodern Condition*.<sup>11</sup> *The Postmodern Condition* is arguably the text most frequently associated with postmodernism and an enduring source cited on the topic, in particular in relation to the memorable definition of postmodernism as “incredulity toward metanarratives.”<sup>12</sup> The work was officially commissioned by the *Conseil des universités du Québec* and consists in both report and book form largely of speculation on the future of an area of knowledge in which Lyotard admittedly had little expertise – the natural sciences.<sup>13</sup> Despite Lyotard’s shift toward a more melancholic conception of the postmodern in *Moralités Postmodernes* in 1993, his definition of postmodernism as scepticism toward grand narratives resonated with many and continues to dominate the remnants of popular discourses on postmodernism.

Postmodernism’s suspicion of grand narratives is rooted in a belief that the grand narratives of the Enlightenment were in many ways never achieved, but rather undermined, in practice. However, Matthew Taylor, Chief Executive of The Royal Society for the Encouragement of the Arts, Manufacture and Commerce (RSA), an organisation that utilises the strapline ‘21<sup>st</sup> century enlightenment,’ argues the core ideals of the Enlightenment have shaped modern values and consciousness. He maintains that thinking through the Enlightenment and Enlightenment ideals critically might constitute a kind of cultural psychotherapy and calls for engagement with the term

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<sup>7</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *Moralités postmodernes* (Paris: Galilée, 1993).

<sup>8</sup> Perry Anderson, *The Origins of Postmodernity* (London: Verso, 1998), 36.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Geoffrey Bennington, *Lyotard: Writing the Event* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press and Columbia University Press, 1988), 1 and Anderson, *The Origins of Postmodernity*, 36.

<sup>11</sup> Anderson, *The Origins of Postmodernity*, 26.

<sup>12</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), xxiv.

<sup>13</sup> Anderson, *The Origins of Postmodernity*, 26. Anderson draws attention to Lyotard’s self-deprecating dismissal of the work in later years, drawing on an interview he gave eight years after the book was published: “I made up stories, I referred to a quantity of books I’d never read, apparently it impressed people, it’s all a bit of a parody...It’s simply the worst of my books, they’re almost all bad, but that one’s the worst.”

rather than rejection of it.<sup>14</sup> Certainly, much postmodernist art, literature and film, sometimes derided or dismissed for its lack of supposed seriousness, can be understood as taking on the challenge of critiquing the legacy of the Enlightenment in a range of complicated, ambivalent and meaningful ways. Any understanding of the postmodern as merely a rejection of, rather than engagement with, the legacy of the Enlightenment fails to recognise the ways that the legacy of the Enlightenment is negotiated within postmodernism. However, whereas Enlightenment ideals had a good run in terms of their associations with optimism and hope before their catastrophic undermining, postmodernism's period as something to be celebrated was extremely short lived.

Eagleton's 1996 *The Illusions of Postmodernism* offers a particularly bleak interpretation of postmodernism. He conceptualises postmodernism as the product of political defeat on the left. With 'the death of the subject,' an idea closely associated with postmodernism and deconstruction that will be explored in detail in chapter three, came the death of the problematic but hopeful 'working class subject,' whose revolutionary potential and selectively attributed, ever nascent agency was now undermined. Eagleton asks the reader to imagine a time when radical impulses would shift "from the transformative to the subversive, and nobody except the advertisers would speak of revolution anymore," when "the elation of an earlier, more hopeful phase of radicalism would survive, but [...] be blended with the hard-boiled pragmatism of its disillusioned aftermath, to give birth to a fresh style of left ideology which one might dub libertarian pessimism."<sup>15</sup> This position, he suggests, is postmodernism. One of the facets of postmodernism most often lauded in celebratory terms, its potential for subversion, is stripped of agency and recast as an indicator of the loss of something more transformative and powerful. Callinicos also associates postmodernism with the demise of the left and a retreat from radical alternatives.<sup>16</sup> However, according to James Heartfield, both Eagleton and Callinicos are "pomo refuseniks" who "do not want to go down the road to the end of all grand narratives" or "see the working class Subject of socialist emancipation sidelined."<sup>17</sup> Hence, Heartfield argues, their accounts are actually "dissident to the trend" of postmodernism more broadly and are "in some sense the accounts of outsiders."<sup>18</sup> Their critiques, however, have contributed to postmodernism's melancholy turn since the 1990s.

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<sup>14</sup> Matthew Taylor, "21<sup>st</sup> Century Enlightenment," *RSA Discover*, June 2010, accessed June 21, 2020, <https://www.thersa.org/discover/videos/event-videos/2010/06/21st-century-enlightenment->

<sup>15</sup> Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (Malden, MA and Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 4.

<sup>16</sup> Callinicos, *Against Postmodernism*.

<sup>17</sup> James Heartfield, *The 'Death of the Subject' Explained* (Sheffield: Sheffield Hallam University School of Cultural Studies, 2006), 105.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.



Eagleton and Callinicos's views of postmodernism are emblematic of what Goulimari states is the position of almost all of postmodernism's great detractors, that "postmodernism demolishes without reconstructing and undermines political agency."<sup>19</sup> Bauman describes how disappointing postmodernism was, for this very reason, for the political left. Postmodernism was "for a time a darling of the 'Left' or whatever part of it scrambled out of the debris of the Berlin Wall [...] exactly the kind of soothing balm that fingers singed to the bone in hot, fiery and yet shamefully lost political battles badly needed."<sup>20</sup> Yet rather than signalling new forms of resistance emerging from an overriding suspicion of grand narratives and the rejection of traditional and limiting understandings of the subject, postmodernism arguably signalled the end of any political alternatives to the increasingly global dominance of capital. The phrase 'incredulity toward metanarratives' is still often conceptualised in celebratory terms, positioning postmodernism as anything but naïve and immune to the seductions of the grand narrative, but by the 1990s postmodernism was heavily inculcated in the progress of the very grand narrative of the rise and supremacy of capital. Chapter two uses Damien Hirst's art as an example both of the convoluted relationship between postmodernism and capitalism, and of the ways in which postmodernism and capitalism have together shaped the construction of death in late postmodern culture.

Despite claims about postmodernism's ability to both deconstruct and transcend metanarratives and dangerous illusions of absolute values with what Goulimari describes as its "Socratic impulse to question truths," its "both/and" way of thinking and its "high tolerance for contradiction," there is arguably only absence at the heart of postmodernism.<sup>21</sup> According to Sinfield, "postmodern discourse is structured by the absence it claims to transcend. Though it repudiates the Angst of Modernism, it often gives off an air of bravado or loss."<sup>22</sup> Mansfield writes that "discussions of the postmodern are marking out an absence, perhaps of discredited and authoritarian systems, but an absence nonetheless."<sup>23</sup> According to Bauman what is most important when seeking to understand the social and cultural climate of 2007, whether it was then identified as postmodernity, late modernity, reflexive modernity, liquid modernity or anything else, is the "sense of *lack*" that most characterised it.<sup>24</sup> He explains a pervasive sense

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<sup>19</sup> Pelagia Goulimari, "Introduction," in *Postmodernism what moment?* ed. Pelagia Goulimari (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 2.

<sup>20</sup> Zygmunt Bauman and Keith Tester, "On the Postmodernism Debate," in *Postmodernism what moment?* ed. Pelagia Goulimari (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 26-27.

<sup>21</sup> Goulimari, "Introduction," 2.

<sup>22</sup> Sinfield, *Literature, Politics and Culture*, 332.

<sup>23</sup> Nick Mansfield, *Subjectivity: Theories of the Self from Freud to Haraway* (New York: New York University Press, 2000) 170.

<sup>24</sup> Bauman and Tester, "On the Postmodernism Debate," 28.

of un-finishedness, of un-accomplishment, of something continually, harrowingly missing or missed, of a road ahead stubbornly refusing to shorten, let alone promising to reach its (vexingly invisible) destination. That eerie feeling – that the world around and the world inside are both, to deploy the never bettered expression of Ernst Bloch, *noch nicht geworden* (“not yet made” or “not yet to hand”). It is the sense of a lack so understood (or rather so experienced) that makes us all compulsive and obsessive identity-seekers, but which also prevents us from ever finishing the search [...] What is celebrated most in postmodernist literature is the positive aspect: freedom to choose at will the difference of one’s liking and to ‘make it stick,’ however temporarily, come what may. But such positive *freedom* is today a privilege of the global elite and off limits for a great majority of the planet’s residents.<sup>25</sup>

It is perhaps the sense of lack that Bauman describes as making “us all compulsive and obsessive identity-seekers,” unable to ever complete the search for the self – whether or not, as will be examined in chapter three, any concept of a unified self could be said to exist – that has made postmodernism so hospitable to capitalism, and in turn what has made both postmodernism and capitalism so enduring.

As Lyotard did, many of those who initially celebrated freedom of choice as a positive aspect of postmodernism soon came to focus on the ways that people’s choices were severely limited by structures beyond their control as the individual freedom of the few continued to deny the freedom of the many. In the 2007 collection on postmodernism in which the above interview with Bauman appears, the editor notes “austere moods” in the text’s various authors, “ranging from circumspection, to sobriety, to bleakness,” and an emerging consensus that “any triumphal celebration of the postmodern against the modern is out of place.”<sup>26</sup> Yet for Gane and Gane, writing in the same collection, the postmodern still signifies something more positive. It has led to “the emergence of a vital new freedom as opportunities for creative work open up in a world without pre-given value-standards.”<sup>27</sup> Rather than being marked by loss, defeat or failure, “postmodernism is about *the pleasure of death* (the death of the author, of universality, of meta-narratives, of absolute truth, of progress, and so on).”<sup>28</sup> Varied ways of deconstructing, reconstructing, writing, reading and ‘making sense’ are central to this playful, pleasurable and productive death which opens up rather than closing down, allowing both for radical texts and radical interpretations to emerge.

Similarly for Jane Flax, “one of the most generative and enduring legacies of this disparate variety of thinking gathered under the rubric of ‘postmodernism’ is a profound shift in the

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Goulimari, “Introduction,” 1.

<sup>27</sup> Mike Gane and Nicholas Gane, “The postmodern: after the (non-)event,” in *Postmodernism what moment?* ed. Pelagia Goulimari (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 128.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

constituting assumptions and limiting conditions of discourses about subjectivity.”<sup>29</sup> As chapter three examines, the expansion of the subject associated with postmodernism has arguably been central to opening up opportunities for engagement with death and the dead in late postmodern culture. To some extent Eagleton recognises the potentially radical trajectory in postmodernism associated with its multiplicity of subject positions, ways of reading and opportunities for subversion. However, he warns: “there is nothing automatically radical about either margins or minorities.”<sup>30</sup> He is critical of the notion “that plurality or otherness or multiplicity is inherently subversive.”<sup>31</sup> Even when texts or practices are subversive or radical they can be marketised, co-opted into the very system they might have come to challenge. Eagleton argues that the post-war west witnessed culture becoming “a vital force in material reproduction as a whole, firmly locked into the commodity production which, in the era of high modernism, it characteristically disdained.”<sup>32</sup> The struggle and contradiction between the politically progressive potential of postmodernist texts, practices and ideas and their concurrent assimilation into the free market are crucial to understandings of postmodernism.

On the whole, understandings and descriptions of postmodernism as melancholy are focused on the disappointments of postmodernism, the promises that never materialised and the continued exploitation and marginalisation of so many for whom the freedom to choose supposedly offered by postmodernism never materialised. Its ties to capitalism, examined in the next section, are central to these criticisms. This thesis will go on to argue, however, that postmodernism, and what will be defined here as late postmodern culture in particular, can also be understood as melancholy in quite a different way. In Freud’s classic definition of the term, discussed in more detail in chapters four and five, he positions it as “something more than normal mourning.”<sup>33</sup> He asserts that “in melancholia the relation to the object is not a simple one” but is “complicated” due to “conflict” and “ambivalence.”<sup>34</sup> As Eng and Kazanjian explain, for Freud melancholia is a condition in which “the past is neither fixed nor complete” and “remains steadfastly alive in the present.”<sup>35</sup> This thesis argues that death, the dead, and the pasts they represent, are all keenly felt and very much present in late postmodern culture. Chapter two examines ambivalent attitudes toward death and the dead that typify late postmodern culture, and chapter five considers how ambivalence about the

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<sup>29</sup> Jane Flax, “Subjectivity, ethics, politics: learning to live without the subject,” in *Postmodernism what moment?* ed. Pelagia Goulimari (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 74-75.

<sup>30</sup> Terry Eagleton, “The contradictions of postmodernism,” *New Literary History* 8.1 (1997): 2.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Sigmund Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” *Standard Edition*, 14: 256.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> David Eng and David Kazanjian, “Introduction: mourning remains,” in *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, eds. David Eng and David Kazanjian (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2003), 3-4.

past, and in particular the twentieth century, are negotiated in televisual texts. In chapters four and five, late postmodern culture is positioned as replete with anti-consolatory messages emphasising the power of memory and the importance of the responsibility of the living toward the dead. Ideas about enduring bonds with the dead emerge in deconstruction and in the concept of hauntology, in psychological theories and in psychoanalysis, in the autobiographical texts examined in chapter four and the televisual narratives explored in chapter five, as well as in a range of other examples. Though it is often in relation to the dominance of capitalism that postmodernism has been conceptualised as melancholy, this thesis argues that the confluence of capitalism with postmodernism's interest in margins and the marginalised, and its ambivalence in relation to the past, have expanded opportunities for engagement with death and the dead. This engagement, as chapters four and five will argue, is often characterised by a productive melancholy that has the potential to sustain and restore, and that emphasises the presence and agency of the dead. The melancholic contours described here are what make late postmodern culture especially hospitable to engagement with death and the dead. Late postmodern culture is home to a wide range of cultural texts seeking to 'make sense' of death and the place of the dead, often explicitly grappling with ambivalent, anti-consolatory and complex ideas about death and loss. These texts both contribute to the production of a climate that is hospitable to engagement with death, loss and the dead and are a product of an environment that, for the breadth of reasons to be discussed in this thesis, has become one where attempts to 'make sense' of death might feel especially 'at home.'

### **Capitalism, postmodernism and the death of alternatives**

Jameson identified early on that the increasing dominance of capital would be central to understandings of postmodernism. His account of postmodernism positions it explicitly as the cultural logic of late capitalism.<sup>36</sup> According to Kundel, Jameson "produced what remains the most imposing account of the culture we all still inhabit."<sup>37</sup> Kundel ascribes to the view that, even if many consider postmodernism to be long dead, the conditions of production and consumption Jameson described as the social and economic foundations of postmodernism remain pervasive. If they have changed, it is only because they have intensified. Rather than spelling the end of the metanarrative as Lyotard initially claimed, Jameson suggests that postmodernism is, as Kundel puts it, "better understood as the recruitment of the entire world into the same big story, namely the development of global capitalism."<sup>38</sup> Anderson writes that the "universal triumph of capital" has signified "more

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<sup>36</sup> Jameson, *Postmodernism*.

<sup>37</sup> Benjamin Kundel, "Into the Big Tent," *London Review of Books* 32.8, April 22, 2010: 12, accessed June 21, 2020, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v32/n08/benjamin-kundel/into-the-big-tent>

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

than just a defeat for all those forces once arrayed against it” but in fact the outright “cancellation of political alternatives.”<sup>39</sup> Where the possibility of political alternatives “was an essential horizon of modernism,” postmodernism is characterised by scepticism toward any political alternatives that take the form of a universalising and historicising account of the subject. Once any political alternative “vanishes” then “something like postmodernism is in place” and in this sense, Anderson is situating postmodernism as coming fully into fruition with the fall of the Berlin wall.<sup>40</sup> One of the great metanarratives that died in 1989 was the long-standing confrontation between communism and capitalism. The death of that metanarrative opened up a vacuum capitalism could fill. With the fall of the Soviet bloc – and of a deeply flawed but potentially viable political alternative to capitalism – “the hegemony of capital became less palatable,” now representing not an alternative, but the death of any alternative.<sup>41</sup>

The narrative of no alternative has intensified in the twenty-first century, alongside the intensification of capitalism’s global reach and hold. Margaret Thatcher’s famous phrase ‘there is no alternative’ (to the market) made a comeback in 2013, the year Thatcher died, when David Cameron used it.<sup>42</sup> Politicians on the right have since been joined by academics on the left who have stated that not only is there no alternative, no alternative can even be imagined anymore. Jameson wrote in 2003 that “someone once said that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism.”<sup>43</sup> Though Jameson always understood postmodernism as the cultural logic of late capitalism, the dominance of capital undermined other understandings of postmodernism that defined it as profoundly sceptical or as a rejection of metanarratives. So many characteristics often associated with postmodernism – its valuing of difference, irony, mixing of high and low culture, intertextuality, polysemy and pastiche – have been so commercially successful that they are now thoroughly culturally dominant. Think recently, for example, of the spread of the meta from metafiction into highly self-referential film and television, the popularity of intertextual crossovers in franchises or the polysemy of videogames and Netflix’s *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* (2018) with their multiple potential endings.<sup>44</sup> As Anderson emphasises, the “ideological triumph” of capital, which

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<sup>39</sup> Anderson, *The Origins of Postmodernity*, 92.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>42</sup> Nick Robinson, “Economy: There is no alternative (TINA) is back,” *BBC*, March 7, 2013, accessed June 21, 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-21703018>

<sup>43</sup> Jameson and Slavoj Žižek have both been credited with coining this phrase. Frederic Jameson, “Future City,” *New Left Review* 21 (2003); Žižek in *Žižek!*, dir. Astra Taylor, Zeitgeist Films, 2015, Feature Film. For a discussion of the attributions and misattributions of the phrase see Matthew Beaumont, “Imagining the End Times: Ideology, the Contemporary Disaster Movie in *Contagion*,” in *Žižek and Media Studies*, eds. Matthew Flisfeder and Louis-Paul Willis (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

<sup>44</sup> *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch*, created by Charlie Brooker, Netflix, 2018, Interactive Film.

was made possible in part by exploiting the postmodern values of difference, diversity and individuality, has “appeared to vindicate just the kind of legitimating narrative whose obituary Lyotard had set out to write” when he proclaimed the demise of the metanarrative.<sup>45</sup> As such, whether understood as always having been tied to capitalism in the way Jameson asserts or whether understood as something that was hostile toward capitalism but then co-opted into it, there is no doubt postmodernism is now bound to capitalism in a range of ways. As this chapter will go on to suggest, it is at the intersections between capitalism and postmodernism that new opportunities for engagement with death and the dead have emerged. The valuing of difference and diversity extolled by postmodernism and the capacity to exploit these interests in capitalism, for example, has led to the availability of diverse representations of death and the dead. However, postmodernism can also be understood in terms of the death of difference itself.

### **Neoliberalism, postmodernism and the death of difference**

David Harvey argues that neoliberalism, an important tool in the spread and dominance of contemporary capitalism, has also been important in the spread of postmodernism. As a political project, Harvey argues, neoliberalism has been particularly suited to exploiting the key characteristics associated with postmodernism. Neoliberal policy is dependent on the construction, through both political and economic change, of a thoroughly market-based culture that responds and caters to different tastes, desires and ideologies. Consequently, Harvey argues, neoliberalism has “proved more than a little compatible with that cultural impulse called ‘post-modernism’ which had long been lurking in the wings but could now emerge full-blown as both a cultural and an intellectual dominant.”<sup>46</sup> For Harvey, neoliberalism as a political strategy was central to postmodernism’s shift from subversive and celebratory mode to money-making cultural norm. Neoliberalism, defined by Harvey as “the financialization of everything,” has also been central to the intensification of the conditions of late capitalism in general.<sup>47</sup> As Colin Crouch points out, neoliberalism is a kind of undead political project that seems to keep coming back.<sup>48</sup> The numerous economic crises precipitated by neoliberal policy should arguably have brought an end to a political strategy that vocally rejects state intervention whilst being simultaneously dependent on it for its survival. However, the power of organisations deemed ‘too big to fail’ is continually reinstated. The way that neoliberal policies can seem impervious to crises (on which they are arguably actually

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<sup>45</sup> Anderson, *The Origins of Postmodernity*, 35.

<sup>46</sup> David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 42.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, 33.

<sup>48</sup> Colin Crouch, *The Strange Non-death of Neoliberalism* (Cambridge and Malden: Polity Press, 2003).

reliant to begin with) goes some way to explaining why it seems “easier to imagine the end of the world than [...] the end of capitalism.”<sup>49</sup>

Though postmodernism is often defined in terms of its “commitment to difference,”<sup>50</sup> there is little disagreement that there is a notable homogeneity in the vast market of products, narratives and experiences on offer within it, perpetuating what Miles, Cliff and Burr refer to as the “myth of individual choice.”<sup>51</sup> Nealon draws attention to the same phenomenon, in which the notion of an individual subjectivity constructed through consumption is able to feed the market in ways not possible in an age of mass production: “the rock’n’roll style of rebellious, existential individuality, largely unassimilable under the mass-production dictates of midcentury Fordism, has become the engine of post-Fordist, niche-market consumption capitalism.”<sup>52</sup> As personalised recommendations generated by algorithms, subscription boxes and services that select and send you items that are mass produced but tailored to you become more popular, individualism and difference come to underpin, rather than to undermine, the market. Eagleton sees this contradiction between sameness and difference in the spread of postmodernism at a global level, emphasising the irony “beyond anything flaunted” by postmodernism’s “own fictions” of the global reach of postmodern culture.<sup>53</sup> Whilst the “cherishing of cultural difference” is a central concern of postmodernism, as an ideological force it has actively contributed to “the remorseless cultural homogenization of the globe, exporting a philosophy of difference as, among other things, a mode of Western cultural integration.”<sup>54</sup> Postmodernism’s “high tolerance for contradiction” can again be seen in this purported embracing of difference and simultaneous homogeneity.<sup>55</sup>

### Dating postmodernism

So far, postmodernism has mainly been situated here in relation to the development of capital and the expansion of the global marketplace, considering definitions of the postmodern more focused on economic factors than literary or artistic practices. This might reinforce the view that, as Anderson

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<sup>49</sup> Jameson, “Future City.” See other persuasive reasons for the persistence of capitalism in John Lanchester, “Marx at 193,” *London Review of Books* 34.7, April 5, 2012, accessed June 21, 2020, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v34/n07/john-lanchester/marx-at-193>

<sup>50</sup> Mansfield, *Subjectivity*, 184.

<sup>51</sup> Steven Miles, Dallas Cliff and Vivien Burr, “‘Fitting In and Sticking Out’: Consumption, Consumer Meanings and the Construction of Young People’s Identities,” *Journal Of Youth Studies* 1.1 (1998): 83, doi: [10.1080/13676261.1998.10592996](https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.1998.10592996)

<sup>52</sup> Jeffrey T. Nealon, *Post-Postmodernism: or, The Cultural Logic of Just In Time Capitalism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), 56.

<sup>53</sup> Eagleton, “The contradictions of Postmodernism,” 5.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Goulimari, “Introduction,” 2.

sees it, postmodernism as a set of distinct artistic practices was “largely a figment.”<sup>56</sup> The devices associated with postmodernism from bricolage to hybridity, pastiche and the decentring of the subject could all be identified in modernism. As such, what marked postmodernism out as different for Anderson was that it operated as “a gradual degradation of modernism itself, as it had become increasingly commodified and integrated into the circuits of post-war capital.”<sup>57</sup> This cynical understanding of postmodernism perhaps undermines and undervalues the playful, creative, original and often political work of a range of postmodernist artists, writers, musicians, filmmakers and activists, both at postmodernism’s outset and now. However, the problems of trying to define postmodernism based on a set of key characteristics have long since been acknowledged.

As Cedric Watts has stated when discussing *Tristram Shandy*<sup>58</sup> – Laurence Sterne’s 1759 novel that Steve Coogan describes as “a postmodern classic written way before there was any modern to be post about”<sup>59</sup> – “if we choose to define ‘modernism’ and ‘postmodernism’ by characteristics regardless of dates, both have long been with us.”<sup>60</sup> Steven Moore’s thought-provoking alternative history of the novel demonstrates that throughout the rise of the novel, there were always examples of different things happening – against the grain but parallel, simultaneous but different.<sup>61</sup> *Tristram Shandy* might have been a postmodernist masterpiece but Sterne was not adopting literary practices and devices commonplace at the time. Defining postmodernism in relation to a set of characteristics in literature, art, architecture or elsewhere without considering the importance of the contexts in which they emerged risks both marginalising innovation and failing to see the importance of the relationship between texts and the social and (most importantly, for Jameson at least) economic conditions that shape culture. Seeking to root out and put together all of the texts that might be considered postmodernist in hindsight might also be understood as adhering to a rather modernist impulse to unify. Any attempt to define and pin down postmodernism can be criticised as inherently modernist in this way. Gane and Gane claim that those who complain about the lack of a clear definition of postmodernism are privileging “modern values of clarity, consensus and convergence” over more “heterogeneous ways of thinking that accept and work with ambiguities, uncertainties and complexity.”<sup>62</sup> They argue that “the very idea that the postmodern has to *mean* something, that this meaning has to be *clear*, and that any movement that is

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<sup>56</sup> Anderson, *The Origins of Postmodernity*, 80.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Laurence Sterne, *Tristram Shandy* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 1996).

<sup>59</sup> *A Cock and Bull Story*, dir. Michael Winterbottom, BBC Films, 2005, Feature Film.

<sup>60</sup> Cedric Watts, “Introduction,” in Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, xvii.

<sup>61</sup> Steven Moore, *The Novel: An Alternative History 1600-1800* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2010).

<sup>62</sup> Gane and Gane, “The postmodern,” 128.



postmodern in orientation is to be necessarily one and *unified* in aim is already to work from modernist value presuppositions,” promoting these over other ways of understanding and ‘making sense.’<sup>63</sup> As the epigraph to this chapter suggests, in order to use theory to ‘make sense’ — of ourselves, others and culture — it is necessary to be open to contradiction, uncertainty and questioning, and to enter into the process knowing that the task can never be successfully completed, not least because of the immensity of the chasm between language and experience that the poststructuralist writing considered in chapter three draws attention to.<sup>64</sup>

A range of disciplinary and geographical tensions arise when considering the different moments at which postmodernism is pinpointed as having begun. For example, Eagleton associates postmodernism with the defeats of 1968, but in doing so fails to recognise the US postmodernist fictions of the 1950s. Crosthwaite gives an overview of some of the key events and dates that have been associated with the “emergence, inauguration, or coalescence of” postmodernism from 1939 to September 11 2001, pointing out that one of the few things those writing about postmodernism seems to agree on is the impossibility of cementing the moment when it arrived.<sup>65</sup> Best and Kellner state there are “good reasons” to associate it with August 1945, specifically “the end of European fascism, the advent of the Atomic Age, and the acceleration of an arms race that intensified the co-construction of science, technology and capitalism.”<sup>66</sup> Various others agree with this general starting point, further muddying the waters between modernism and postmodernism.

### **The postmodernism/postmodernity divide**

The challenges encountered when trying to define postmodernism have led some to differentiate between the term postmodernism and the term postmodernity. Using this division, postmodernism is typically defined as a set of literary and artistic characteristics or as an architectural, artistic, literary and critical movement and postmodernity as a periodisation of a social and cultural epoch associated with a stage of advanced capitalism, technological and scientific developments and globalisation. There tends to be a disciplinary divide with the social sciences preferring, on the

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> The epigraph reads “theory emerges out of the possibly deluded project of making sense of ourselves and others. It is haunted, and driven, by the inevitability of its failure and the necessity of carrying on.” Davis, *After Poststructuralism*, 177.

<sup>65</sup> Paul Crosthwaite, *Trauma, Postmodernism, and the Aftermath of World War II* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 9-12. September 11 2001 is referred to in this way as opposed to September 11 or 9/11 to emphasise the erasure in the latter terminology of other traumatic events on that date including, as Ken Loach makes clear in his contribution to the 2002 collection of short films *11'09'2001 September 11*, the death of Salvadore Allende on September 11, 1973. For a discussion of the idiom 9/11 more broadly, see Marc Redfield, “Virtual Trauma: The Idiom of 9/11,” *Diacritics* 37.1 (2007): 54-80, doi: [10.1353/dia.0.0020](https://doi.org/10.1353/dia.0.0020)

<sup>66</sup> Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, *The Postmodern Adventure: Science, Technology, and Cultural Studies at the Third Millennium* (London: Routledge, 2001), 59-60.

whole, the latter and the humanities the former. Within the latter definition, work within the social sciences has tended to favour Harvey's seminal text on postmodernity.<sup>67</sup> However, Jameson's writing examines the characteristics of postmodernism in relation to art, architecture, literature and film as well as defining it as a periodisation more broadly and has been popular in both the humanities and social sciences perhaps for this reason. Some, like Douglas Kellner, critique both Jameson and Harvey's texts for their focus on capital at the expense of acknowledging the importance of scientific and technological developments.<sup>68</sup> On the whole, many seem to agree that a division between postmodernism and postmodernity should be adhered to. McHale blames the "conflation of the cultural notion of postmodernism (and its inherent relationship to modernism) and postmodernity as the designation of a social and philosophical period or 'condition'" for the confusion surrounding the term postmodernism.<sup>69</sup> Kellner, whose work this chapter will return to later in relation to Jean Baudrillard as a theorist heavily but perhaps wrongly associated with postmodernism, also argues that distinctions between "modernity and postmodernity as historical epochs; modernism and postmodernism in the arts; and modern and postmodern theory" should be delineated and upheld.<sup>70</sup>

However, as Hutcheon has pointed out, "the slippage from postmodernity to postmodernism is constant and deliberate in Jameson's work."<sup>71</sup> This is because Jameson seeks to emphasise that from the outset the features of postmodernism were inherently tied to the conditions of postmodernity (specifically the conditions of late capitalism). Though Jameson does not suggest, as some do, that all of the features of postmodernism can be identified in modernism, he makes the point that even if they could, then the conditions of postmodernity would make them function very differently to the way they did during modernity. He writes:

even if all the constitutive features of postmodernism were identical and continuous with those of an older modernism – a position I feel to be demonstrably erroneous but which only an even lengthier analysis of modernism proper could dispel – the two phenomena would still remain utterly distinct in their meaning and social function, owing to the very different positioning of postmodernism in the economic system of late capital, and beyond that, to the transformation of the very sphere of culture in contemporary society.<sup>72</sup>

Jameson later developed this point whilst remaining characteristically vague, explaining that he

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<sup>67</sup> David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into Cultural Change* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990); Jameson, *Postmodernism*.

<sup>68</sup> Douglas Kellner, "Reappraising the postmodern: novelties, mapping and historical narratives," in *Postmodernism what moment?* ed. Pelagia Goulimari (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 124.

<sup>69</sup> Brian McHale, *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 23.

<sup>70</sup> Kellner, "Reappraising the postmodern," 103.

<sup>71</sup> Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, 25.

<sup>72</sup> Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 57.

considers the “place of culture and its consumption,” rather than the cultural products of postmodernism per se, to have become “radically different in the new global dispensation than it was in the modernist period.”<sup>73</sup> Though often accused of focusing too much on capitalism, Jameson does also deem advances in science, technology and globalisation central to postmodernity as a periodisation. According to Jameson, “one can register a different kind of transnational flow of imagery and music, as well as of information, along the networks of a new world system.”<sup>74</sup> He adopts an approach that seeks not just to identify a set of characteristics but to understand postmodern texts within the conditions of their production and consumption in a way that can be understood as culturally materialist.<sup>75</sup> As such, Jameson sees postmodernism as a very broad “periodizing” concept,<sup>76</sup> or what Kundel refers to as a “big tent” — an inclusive condition that covers over everything, rather than just a set of cultural practices or artistic techniques.<sup>77</sup>

Jameson made his lack of distinction between postmodernity and postmodernism clear in 2007 when he argued that “in its most fundamental acceptance, postmodernity functioned first and foremost as a periodizing concept, one only later hijacked for a variety of other purposes and uses.”<sup>78</sup> He suggests that, rather than distinguishing between postmodernism and postmodernity, we should distinguish between those who see postmodernism as

a kind of philosophy or philosophical stance; those which see it as a social phenomenon, including cultural and political values and deeper phenomenological experiences; and those, finally, which grasp it more narrowly as an aesthetic or even one artistic style among others. All these approaches are perfectly proper, of course, and give us many insights into the new system, if that is what it is. But if that is what it is — a system, perhaps one of an as yet unauthorized kind — the insistence on each focus in the absence of the others risks missing the nature and dynamics of the totality.<sup>79</sup>

Jameson is typically welcoming of other methodologies and intellectual endeavours but sees value in postmodernism as a broad and totalising term for understanding a broad and totalising condition, bucking the trend of what is arguably a postmodernist impulse to reject periodisation and totalisation. In utilising such broad and all-encompassing a definition of postmodernism as “the

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<sup>73</sup> Frederic Jameson, “The End of Temporality,” *Critical Inquiry* 29.4 (2003): 702, doi: 10.1086/377726

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> For a consideration of Jameson’s work as a development of Williams’s notion of cultural materialism see Kevin Sean Kavanagh, *Raymond Williams and the limits of cultural materialism*. PhD thesis, University of Warwick, 1997, accessed June 21, 2020, <http://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/50785/>

<sup>76</sup> Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 3.

<sup>77</sup> Benjamin Kundel, “Into the Big Tent,” *London Review of Books* 32.8, April 22, 2010: 12, accessed June 21, 2020, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v32/n08/benjamin-kunkel/into-the-big-tent>

<sup>78</sup> Frederic Jameson, “Postscript,” in *Postmodernism what moment?* ed. Pelagia Goulimari (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 213.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

cultural logic of late capitalism,” Jameson is suggesting that postmodernism is hegemonic whereas, as Anderson highlights, even “in its heyday modernism had never been much more than an enclave.”<sup>80</sup>

The distinction between postmodernism and postmodernity is one that Eagleton also identifies as useful but nevertheless rejects, instead sticking to the term postmodernism to refer to both because, as he justifies it, rather dismissively, “they are clearly closely related.”<sup>81</sup> In this sense, Eagleton fails to acknowledge that many postmodernist texts have been clearly antagonistic toward postmodernity more broadly, and perhaps Jameson is guilty of this too. As Hutcheon argues, though postmodernist texts are a product of postmodernity and as such often replicate, reinforce, ape or mirror its effects, they “also critique those effects, while never pretending to be able to operate outside of them.”<sup>82</sup> Hutcheon’s exhorts us to keep the two terms separate because in this way we can “show that critique is as important as complicity in the response of cultural postmodernism to the philosophical and socio-economic realities of postmodernity.”<sup>83</sup> In this sense, postmodernism, as opposed to postmodernity, “is not so much what Jameson sees as a systemic form of capitalism as the name given to cultural practices which acknowledge their inevitable implication in capitalism, without relinquishing the power or will to intervene critically in it.”<sup>84</sup> Postmodernism may be “wilfully compromised, more ideologically ambivalent or contradictory” than modernism, but it is not always passively accepting, and can often be seen to be engaged in critiquing, challenging, and questioning the conditions of postmodernity.<sup>85</sup> Indeed, some have elected to use the term postmodern to refer to those texts that reflect uncritically the conditions of postmodernity in adopting postmodern techniques such as, for example, the television series *Big Brother* (2000 - 2018), and to utilise the word postmodernist for those texts that seem to be more knowing, critical and subversive in their approach, for example Charlie Brooker’s *Black Mirror* (2011 - ).<sup>86</sup> However, this kind of division relies on a range of value judgements about ‘knowing’ and ‘unknowing’ texts and might be accused of a very un-postmodern impulse to categorise.

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<sup>80</sup> Anderson, *The Origins of Postmodernity*, 64.

<sup>81</sup> Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, 1.

<sup>82</sup> Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, 25.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>86</sup> *Big Brother*, created by John de Mol, Channel 4, Channel 5, 2000-2018, Television Series; *Black Mirror*, created by Charlie Brooker, Channel 4, Netflix, 2011 – present. Television Anthology.

David Foster Wallace is one example of someone who made a distinction between what he deemed a rebellious and socially useful postmodernism and something else. He argued in 1993 that things had gotten “cybernetically post-postmodern,” a situation he was highly critical of.<sup>87</sup> In the post-postmodern world Wallace saw around him, “irony, irreverence, and rebellion,” central to postmodernism’s successes for Wallace, were no longer “liberating but enfeebling.”<sup>88</sup> The “rebellious irony in the best postmodern fiction” (for example Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, William Burroughs) had been both credible and “socially useful,” leading the reader to question appearances and the world around them.<sup>89</sup> In the 1960s irony in art and culture was “difficult and painful, and *productive*” but “the assumptions behind this early postmodern irony [...] were still frankly idealistic: that etiology and diagnosis pointed toward cure; that revelation of imprisonment yielded freedom.”<sup>90</sup> Irony had, for Wallace, lost all of its power in post-postmodern culture partly because it did not age very well. It was “*still around*, bigger than ever after thirty long years as the dominant mode of hip expression.”<sup>91</sup> He found newer postmodernist fiction, or what he derisively called the fiction of image, to be characterised by the “strategic deployment of pop-cultural references – brand names, celebrities, television programs,” reflecting “the new importance of mass commercial culture.”<sup>92</sup>

Wallace mourned the absorption of postmodernist fiction into mass commercial culture, emphasising that its critique of that culture had stopped being a critique and started being complicit in it. Wallace situated television as particularly post-postmodern, central to the institutionalisation of irony and postmodern rebellion. Television had a knack for “ingeniously absorbing, homogenizing, and re-presenting the very cynical postmodern aesthetic that was once the best alternative to the appeal of low, over-easy, mass-marketed narrative.”<sup>93</sup> However, McHale points out that Wallace’s critique of postmodernism’s decline is perhaps grounded in anxiety about the relationship of his own work to his postmodernist predecessors (Thomas Pynchon in particular, whose novels are often alluded to in Wallace’s own). In the 1990s, new writers “seemed condemned to the status of the second-generation postmodernists, acutely aware of their first-generation precursors and afflicted to various degrees with anxiety of influence.”<sup>94</sup> This was partly because many of the big names of

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<sup>87</sup> David Foster Wallace, “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction,” *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13:2 (1993): 151.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 183.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 183. Italics in original.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.* Italics in original.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 166.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 173.

<sup>94</sup> McHale, *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodernism*, 137. The phrase ‘the anxiety of influence’ comes from Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A theory of Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).

literary postmodernism continued to be prolific, making it difficult for new authors to break through or feel they were doing something different. Some writers that can be understood as postmodernist were posthumously prolific, such as Angela Carter, whose work was rebranded and translated for new markets after her death. As Penfold-Mounce argues, posthumous careers can be highly profitable, so much so that “the value of dead celebrities [...] encapsulates how capitalism and consumerism is so entrenched in the Western world that death is now just a new stage in a celebrity’s career path.”<sup>95</sup> Wallace’s career continued after his death in 2008 and he was a finalist for the 2012 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction with the unfinished novel *The Pale King*. For Wallace, the total convergence of capitalism and postmodernism destroyed postmodernism proper, replacing it with an impotent post-postmodernism. Yet as this thesis argues, the confluence of capitalism and postmodernism also seems to have opened up a wide range of new opportunities, commercial and otherwise, for engagement with death and the dead. As the impulses of postmodernism from irony and rebellion to a keen interest in voices from the margins came to be absorbed by mass commercial culture, new opportunities arose for representing death and the dead in fiction, film, television, art, fashion, advertising and more. Postmodernism and capitalism together have led to ample opportunities for attempts to ‘make sense’ of loss in complicated, contradictory and ambivalent ways, and for negotiating the place of death and the dead in contemporary culture. Whether those individual attempts constitute meaningful engagement with death and the dead or whether they are commercially driven efforts to benefit from what chapter two argues is the increasing ‘coolness’ of death from the 1990s onwards is largely subjective. However, an accumulation of explicit engagement with death and the dead across a range of media and platforms, in particular, as chapter five will show, in screen cultures, have been both a consequence of and a further contributing factor to an environment increasingly hospitable to engagement with death and the dead. In particular, an accumulation of texts across a range of media that seeks to ‘make sense’ in line with postmodernists themes such as the negotiation of the self, tensions between the self and the other, and the interrogation of the past have made late postmodern culture a space especially amenable to engagement with death and the dead.

### **Postmodernism now**

For Wallace, postmodernism was dead in the 1990s when its relationship to commercial culture, television and capitalism turned it from ironic and subversive to enfeebled and socially useless. This is around the same time, as this chapter argues, postmodernism took its melancholy turn. Since the

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<sup>95</sup> Ruth Penfold-Mounce, *Death, the Dead and Popular Culture* (Bingley: Emerald, 2018), 36.

end of the 1990s discussions of literature in relation to postmodernism have waned in the humanities. Theo D'haen has argued that Bertens's 1995 *The Idea of the Postmodern* marked "the end of the debate on postmodernism as a vitally alive and culturally dominant literary movement."<sup>96</sup> However, postmodernism continues to form part of the curricula of arts, humanities and social science disciplines in further and higher education and is still adopted by many as a theoretical framework through which to read contemporary culture and society. In recent years a range of writers have blamed, among other things, the election of Donald Trump on postmodernism. They claim that postmodern theory, supposedly championing the notion that there is no such thing as a fact and peddling extreme relativism, has been adopted by the right. Dennett explicitly states that he thinks "what the postmodernists did was truly evil. They are responsible for the intellectual fad that made it respectable to be cynical about truth and facts."<sup>97</sup> Ernst describes Trump as a "postmodern right-wing antihero."<sup>98</sup> Evidently neither propaganda nor the proliferation of untruths is new, and as Harvey argues, blaming postmodern theory for society's ills is not particularly new either. Long before Trump's presidency Harvey wrote that "neoconservatives typically blame 'liberals' and 'Hollywood', or even 'Postmodernists' for what they see as the dissolution and immorality of the social order, rather than the corporate capitalists."<sup>99</sup> Despite this, Harvey himself remains critical of "postmodern intellectual currents that accord, without knowing it, with the White House line that truth is both socially constructed and a mere effect of discourse."<sup>100</sup> Arguably, the notion that postmodernism is to blame for Trump is based on a misreading of (or more likely a failure to read) postmodern theory, the vast majority of which seeks to critique and 'make sense' of, rather than to champion, the condition of postmodernity.<sup>101</sup> As Hanlon argues, "at the heart of this accusation is the tendency to treat postmodernism as a form of left-wing politics — with its own set of tenets — rather than as a broader cultural moment that left-wing academics diagnosed."<sup>102</sup>

What this current concern with postmodernism suggests is that despite many pronouncements of postmodernism's death from at least the 1990s, it is still firmly a part of the

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<sup>96</sup> Theo D'haen, "European Postmodernism: The Cosmodern Turn," *Narrative* 21.3 (2013): 273, doi: [10.1353/nar.2013.0019](https://doi.org/10.1353/nar.2013.0019)

<sup>97</sup> Daniel Dennett, "I begrudge every hour that I have to spend worrying about politics," interview with Carole Cadwalladr, *The Observer*, February 12, 2017, accessed June 21, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2017/feb/12/daniel-dennett-politics-bacteria-bach-back-dawkins-trump-interview>

<sup>98</sup> David Ernst, "Donald Trump is The First President to Turn Postmodernism Against Itself," *The Federalist*, January 23, 2017, accessed June 21, 2020 <http://thefederalist.com/2017/01/23/donald-trump-first-president-turn-postmodernism/>

<sup>99</sup> Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 166.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 198.

<sup>101</sup> See Davis, *After Poststructuralism* for a discussion of the 'failure to read' postmodern theory in relation to the Sokal affair.

<sup>102</sup> Aaron Hanlon, "Postmodernism Didn't Cause Trump it Explains Him," *Washington Post*, August 31, 2018, accessed June 21, 2020, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/postmodernism-didnt-cause-trump-it-explains-him/2018/08/30/0939f7c4-9b12-11e8-843b-36e177f3081c\\_story.html?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.8bc827015f09](https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/postmodernism-didnt-cause-trump-it-explains-him/2018/08/30/0939f7c4-9b12-11e8-843b-36e177f3081c_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.8bc827015f09)

cultural conversation and, like all theory, it might offer a fruitful if ultimately unsuccessful way of ‘making sense’ of the world around us. Green suggests that it is productive to think of postmodernism as “a process, a perpetual questioning, rather than a sealed historical period.”<sup>103</sup> This might account for the continued popularity of postmodernism and of methodologies associated with postmodernism in both the social sciences and humanities. Later, this chapter will argue that postmodernist impulses are also still with us. First, before justifying why the precise term late postmodern culture is utilised in this thesis, some consideration will be given to alternative terms that have emerged in recent years that might delineate a break with postmodernism.

### **Alternative terms**

The understanding of postmodernism in this thesis is aligned with Jameson’s work, seeing postmodernism and capitalism as always having been closely related. However, this chapter has also emphasised the melancholy shift that took place in writing about postmodernism around the 1990s when those who understood it in celebratory terms were disappointed by its commodification, with many seeing its adoption into the market as the death of postmodernism. No definitive term has emerged to replace postmodernism amongst those who think it has ended, though a number of books featuring the title or subtitle ‘after postmodernism’ were published as early as 1995.<sup>104</sup> The failure of another term to emerge might itself be taken as evidence that postmodernism is still with us, though given most periodisations come about in hindsight postmodernism was, in some ways, named into an early grave from the start. None of the terms discussed in this chapter are capitalised, though they often are in the works cited here. James Curran, in a discussion of early histories of the internet, points out that the tendency to spell internet with a capital I in such histories can be read as indicative of the term’s “early exotic allure,” noting that capitalisation tended to be adopted in accounts that were “illuminating” but also “laudatory” and utopian.<sup>105</sup> Avoiding capitalisation is a way of signalling a critical approach to terms in the same way that, as discussed in the introduction, the term *west* is utilised without capitalisation in this thesis.

The term metamodernism has gained some traction. It was coined by Vermeulen and Akker to define a “discourse, oscillating between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony” in

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<sup>103</sup> Green, *Late Postmodernism*, 23.

<sup>104</sup> Barbara Adam and Stuart Allan, eds. *Theorizing Culture: An Interdisciplinary Critique After Postmodernism* (London: UCL Press, 1995); Jan Faye, *After Postmodernism: A Naturalistic Reconstruction of the Humanities* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011).

<sup>105</sup> James Curran, “Rethinking internet history,” in *Misunderstanding the Internet*, eds. James Curran, Natalie Fenton and Des Freedman (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), 34.



architecture, art and film.<sup>106</sup> Cosmodernism is used by Moraru, whose work is largely concerned with US fiction. He identifies the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 as the initiation of cosmodernism. Cosmodernism, intentionally signalling the term cosmopolitan, is identified as a new cultural paradigm that accounts for the challenging of the postmodern by authors focused on the recognition of alterity rather than on identity politics in the context of accelerating globalisation.<sup>107</sup> Rudrum and Starvis offer an edited collection of a range of what have come to be labelled by some as post-postmodernisms, most of which seek to signal the death of postmodernism. These include remodernism, performatism, hypermodernism, automodernism, renewalism, altermodernism and digimodernism.<sup>108</sup> Each author in the collection articulates the relationship between the term they have coined and postmodernism. None of these terms has yet come close to the success of the term postmodern, which, as mentioned in the introduction, perhaps owing to its breadth and wide range of possible meanings, has managed to infiltrate a vast spectrum of academic disciplines as well as the cultural imagination more broadly.

A broader term emerging as a useful periodisation across a number of disciplines is the anthropocene, denoting a new era in the geological history of the earth – especially one in which the impact of the human species on the planet has become considerable and irreversible. The term was coined by chemist Paul Crutzen in 2000 and is, unsurprisingly, much debated.<sup>109</sup> When the anthropocene can be said as having commenced is a particular area of debate, centred on when in history humans can be understood as having begun a profound and irreversible impact on the planet. Some suggest the epoch could stretch back to the implementation of farming methods. Some place it as beginning with the human-introduction of smallpox in 1610 and others with the use of the atomic bomb in 1945. Consensus suggests 1950, where stratigraphic markers indicate irreversible change associated with CO2 levels.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, "Notes on metamodernism," *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture* 2.1 (2010): 1, doi: 10.3402/jac.v2i0.5677

<sup>107</sup> Christian Moraru, *Cosmodernism: American Narrative, Late Globalization, and the New Cultural Imaginary* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2010).

<sup>108</sup> David Rudrum and Nicholas Starvis, eds. *Supplanting the Postmodern: An Anthology of Writings on the Arts and Culture of the Early 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2015).

<sup>109</sup> Joseph Stromberg, "What is the Anthropocene and Are We in It?," *Smithsonian Magazine*, January 2013, accessed June 21, 2020, <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/what-is-the-anthropocene-and-are-we-in-it-164801414/?no-ist>

<sup>110</sup> David Biello, "Did the Anthropocene Begin in 1950 or 50,000 Years Ago?," *Scientific American*, April 2, 2015, accessed June 21, 2020, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/did-the-anthropocene-begin-in-1950-or-50-000-years-ago/>

Adam Trexler explores fiction in relation to the anthropocene, noting the marked increase in novels exploring the consequences of climate change on the planet.<sup>111</sup> Arguably, a concern with the future of the earth and its inhabitants signals the resurgence of a concern with “the great metaphysical preoccupations, the fundamental questions of being and of the meaning of life” that Jameson argued “seemed so utterly pointless” in postmodernism.<sup>112</sup> The questions that emerge in the anthropocene are ones Jameson might find appealing, articulated by Robert Macfarlane as: “What does it mean to be human?” “What does it mean to live?” and “what does one life mean in the face of species death or the collapse of global civilization? How do we make meaningful choices in the shadow of our inevitable end?”<sup>113</sup> In the lexicon of the anthropocene a new term has also emerged for a “modern uncanny, in which a familiar place is rendered unrecognisable by climate change or corporate action.”<sup>114</sup> The term, solastalgia, is based on the findings of a study of lived experience of drought and mining. Rather than the nostalgia or melancholia of those who have been separated from their home, solastalgia refers to the sense of loss and displacement experienced by those whose communities have been transformed by mining and drought. Loss, melancholy and anxieties about the end are all central to the anthropocene, as they are to the definition of late postmodern culture this chapter will later articulate.

Macfarlane has suggested that “the Anthropocene has already become an anthropomeme: punned and pimped into stuplimity, its presence in popular discourse often just a virtue signal that merely mandates the user to proceed with the work of consumption.”<sup>115</sup> He uses the term stuplimity to refer to “the aesthetic experience in which astonishment is united with boredom, such that we overload on anxiety to the point of outrage-outage.”<sup>116</sup> Macfarlane’s posthuman adaptation of Larkin’s ‘An Arundel Tomb,’ despite seemingly mistaking Larkin’s use of irony for sincerity, sums up the tone he associates with the anthropocene: “‘What will survive of us is love,’ wrote Philip Larkin. Wrong. What will survive of us is plastic – and lead-207, the stable isotope at the end of the uranium-235 decay chain.”<sup>117</sup> Much of Jameson’s writing on postmodernism, in particular his concern with alienation and sense of pointlessness and futility, continue to be pertinent to new

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<sup>111</sup> Adam Trexler, *Anthropocene Fictions: The Novel in a Time of Climate Change* (Virginia: The University of Virginia Press, 2015).

<sup>112</sup> Jameson, *Marxism and Form*, xvii–viii.

<sup>113</sup> Roy Scranton, “Learning How to Die in the Anthropocene,” *The New York Times*, November 10, 2013, accessed June 21, 2020, [http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/11/10/learning-how-to-die-in-the-anthropocene/?\\_r=0](http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/11/10/learning-how-to-die-in-the-anthropocene/?_r=0)

<sup>114</sup> Robert Macfarlane, “Generation Anthropocene: How humans have altered the planet forever,” *The Guardian*, April 1, 2016, accessed June 21, 2020, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/apr/01/generation-anthropocene-altered-planet-for-ever>

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

terms that seek to name the current moment. Anxieties about the end and hopelessness in the face of accumulated years of the side effects of human 'progress' are evidently visible in a seemingly pre-post-apocalyptic cultural landscape in which ruin porn<sup>118</sup> proliferates and playful but perhaps telling titles such as *How to Survive The Zombie Apocalypse* thrive.<sup>119</sup> Luckhurst has gone as far as to argue that we have reached a stage where "globalization extends the state of metaphorical zombification to us all, commanded by abstract, international flows over which we have no control."<sup>120</sup> There are two further terms that have emerged to delineate a shift from postmodernism that explicitly continue the legacy of Jameson's work on postmodernism as the cultural logic of late capitalism, both of which have informed the conception of late postmodern culture offered in this thesis.

### Post-postmodernism

Post-postmodernism is Nealon's preferred term. It signifies the "stammering inability" of the current era to "begin in any way other than intensifying the thing it's supposed to supersede."<sup>121</sup> It indicates the intensification of postmodernism, "as opposed to the overcoming or rendering obsolete of postmodernism that would be implied by a phrase like after postmodernism."<sup>122</sup> Nealon argues that postmodernism as designation and idea has "seemingly been lingering at death's door, refusing to pass definitively, for quite some time."<sup>123</sup> He concedes that the term post-postmodernism is "just plain ugly [...] infelicitous, difficult both to read and to say, as well as nonsensically redundant," but this is, in part, the point.<sup>124</sup> He recognises that where "postmodernism was supposed to signal the end of modernism's fetish of the 'new,' strictly speaking, nothing can come after or 'post-' postmodernism, which ushered in the never-ending end of everything (painting, philosophy, the novel, love, irony, whatever)."<sup>125</sup> Nealon's book pays homage to Jameson's. The title is a play on Jameson's: *Post-postmodernism: Or, The Cultural Logic of Just-in-Time Capitalism*. Nealon perceives post-postmodernism as "an intensification and mutation within postmodernism" in the same way in which postmodernism was a "historical mutation and intensification of certain tendencies within modernism."<sup>126</sup> The additional post- marks not the death of postmodernism but its mutation as it passes beyond "a certain tipping point to become something recognizably different in its contours

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<sup>118</sup> Ruin porn is understood as practices such as the videoing and sharing of derelict buildings, in particular empty abandoned shopping malls. For example, see this video of Detroit: Detroitdrone.com, "Packard Plant Ruin Porn," October 23, 2013, accessed June 21, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hvTwY6tPf4k>

<sup>119</sup> Ben Jackson, *How to Survive the Zombie Apocalypse* (London and Ontario: Indie Publishing Group, 2015).

<sup>120</sup> Roger Luckhurst, *Zombies: A Cultural History* (London: Reaktion Books, 2016), 119.

<sup>121</sup> Nealon, *Post-Postmodernism*, x.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., ix.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

and workings,” though in no way “absolutely foreign to what it was before.”<sup>127</sup> Jameson’s conviction that postmodernism is best understood as a historical period of capitalist development forms Nealon’s starting point as he argues that “capitalism itself is the thing that’s intensified most radically” in the twenty-first century.<sup>128</sup>

In Nealon’s view, the late capitalism of the 1970s and 1980s at the “tail end of the cold war” has intensified and become “the ‘just-in-time’ (which is to say, all-the-time) capitalism of our neoliberal era.”<sup>129</sup> Given that global capitalism “has run out of new territories to conquer,” it must instead seek “primarily to saturate and deepen – intensify – its hold over existing markets.”<sup>130</sup> Loss and death are inscribed into Nealon’s definition of the post-postmodern, in which quotidian life must be saturated with the need to consume and products must contain an inbuilt obsolescence because, with nowhere left to expand to, existing markets need to be continually replumbed. As Bauman suggests, “everything is born with a branding of imminent death” in a culture in which “the spectre of redundancy” hovers over all “labours and creations.”<sup>131</sup> Contrary to advertising that seeks to emphasise the sustainability and quality of products, foreseeable redundancy is a defining characteristic of the products of contemporary capitalism. Nealon states “there is perhaps nothing more universally recognized as ‘postmodern’ or ‘posthuman’ than the triumph of consumption capitalism,” in which “the obliteration of humanist use-value and the concomitant domination of mechanistic exchange” overshadow all else.<sup>132</sup> He suggests there is a trans-disciplinary consensus that “a certain style of consumption-based capital both puts the ‘posts-’ in post-postmodernism and runs the ‘human’ out of posthumanism.”<sup>133</sup> The intensification of consumption-based capital in the era of what Nealon terms post-postmodernism is positioned as a further shift into the “the never-ending end of everything” he associates with the onset of postmodernism.<sup>134</sup> Rather than rendering obsolete postmodernism, this shift signifies the obsolescence of the human as postmodernism intensifies and strengthens its hold. Though the periodisation offered in this thesis shares much in common with Nealon’s, this chapter will go on to argue that there is value in the term late postmodern beyond that of merely avoiding Nealon’s (intentionally clunky) compounding of the noun. However, another term and conceptualisation of the current moment that has informed the

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., x-xi.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>131</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Wasted Lives: Modernity and its Outcasts* (Cambridge and Malden: Polity Press, 2004), 96-97.

<sup>132</sup> Nealon, *Post-Postmodernism*, 90.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid, ix.

one offered in this thesis is Fisher's capitalist realism, which also builds directly on the work of Jameson.

### Capitalist realism

Fisher engages directly with the notion discussed earlier that no alternative to capitalism can any longer be dreamt up, let alone put into practice. Capitalist realism denotes a time characterised by "the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible to even *imagine* a coherent alternative to it."<sup>135</sup> Although capitalist realism could in many ways be "subsumed under the rubric of postmodernism as theorized by Jameson," Fisher has good reasons for a new term.<sup>136</sup> Firstly, the muddled waters of the term postmodernism could do with replacing. As outlined above, they are very much contested territory. Moreover, Fisher sees value in the term capitalist realism in the way Nealon does in post-postmodernism, using it as a way to designate the intensification of the periodisation Jameson outlined and arguing that "some of the processes which Jameson described and analysed have now become so aggravated and chronic that they have gone through a change in kind."<sup>137</sup>

Fisher gives three specific reasons for preferring the term capitalist realism to postmodernism. Firstly, he argues that when Jameson first started writing about postmodernism in the 1980s there were "still, in name at least, political alternatives to capitalism," whereas now there is a "deeper, far more pervasive, sense of exhaustion, of cultural and political sterility," signalling what has been situated here as postmodernism's melancholy turn as the commencement of capitalist realism.<sup>138</sup> The second reason Fisher gives is that whereas postmodernism had some kind of relationship to modernism, in capitalist realism modernism is only a style to be casually adopted (or not) in a consumer marketplace. For Jameson, Fisher writes, modernist forms were being absorbed into popular culture and commodified at the same time that modernism's "supposed belief in elitism and its monological, top-down model of culture" were undergoing challenge and outright rejection in the name of the postmodern ideals of diversity.<sup>139</sup> According to Fisher "capitalist realism no longer stages this kind of confrontation with modernism" because modernism has been "vanquished" and become "something that can periodically return," like everything else, in the form of a "frozen aesthetic style."<sup>140</sup> As Badmington has pointed out, a term like postmodernism is

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<sup>135</sup> Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester and Washington: O Books, 2009), 2.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*

“forever tied up in what it is post-ing.”<sup>141</sup> Fisher argues that we are now in capitalist realism in part because those ties are gone. His third reason is that capitalism now “seamlessly occupies the horizons of the thinkable.”<sup>142</sup> For most young people today, he argues, “the lack of alternatives to capitalism is no longer even an issue.”<sup>143</sup> The idea that everything should be ran as or like a business has become ‘common sense.’<sup>144</sup> Whereas in the 1960s and 1970s capitalism had to contend with containing or seeking to absorb “energies from outside,” from those movements that sought to advance alternatives to capitalism, it now has the opposite problem of “having all-too successfully incorporated externality” leaving it with no outside left to colonise.<sup>145</sup>

Fisher is not implying that recent history was full of “political potentials” or that commodification did not play an important role in the cultural production of the twentieth century, but that under capitalist realism there is no longer any struggle between outside and inside.<sup>146</sup> He argues that “what we are dealing with now is not the incorporation of materials that previously seemed to possess subversive potentials, but instead, their *precorporation*: the pre-emptive formatting and shaping of desires, aspirations and hopes by capitalist culture.”<sup>147</sup> He gives the example of Kurt Cobain to demonstrate the way that ‘alternative’ and ‘independent’ have been co-opted into the system so that rather than designating “something outside mainstream culture” they are instead merely “dominant styles” that exist “within the mainstream.”<sup>148</sup> For someone like Cobain, “even success meant failure, since to succeed would only mean that you were the new meat on which the system could feed.”<sup>149</sup> Similarly, Fisher discusses the ways in which anti-capitalism has become a central theme in capitalist production. You do not have to look far to find a commercially successful film, television series or novel where the central ‘evil’ is a capitalist corporation cathartically defeated in a narrative itself inculcated in the very capitalist system it critiques. Fisher reminds the reader that capitalism may be a “hyper-abstract impersonal structure,” but it “would be nothing without our co-operation.”<sup>150</sup> Even the anti-capitalist movement of the twenty-first century (manifested in Occupy, for example) only forms “a kind of carnivalesque background noise to

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<sup>141</sup> Badmington, “Theorizing Posthumanism,” 20.

<sup>142</sup> Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 8.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> For an analysis of the idea of ‘common sense’ see Errol Lawrence, “Just plain common sense: the ‘roots’ of racism,” in *The Empire Strikes Back: Race and Racism in 70s Britain* (London and New York: Routledge, 1982).

<sup>145</sup> Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 8.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., 15.

capitalist realism,” taking the form of protest over political organising and seeming to seek only the mitigation of the worst excesses of capitalism, rather than posing any alternative to it.<sup>151</sup>

The description of capitalist realism Fisher offers is one of a “pervasive *atmosphere*”<sup>152</sup> characterised by “the normalization of crisis,”<sup>153</sup> acting “as a kind of invisible barrier constraining thought and action.”<sup>154</sup> Fisher’s term foregrounds the importance of capital to postmodernism and whatever has come after it. However, this thesis argues that death and the dead have also come to occupy an important place in late postmodern culture, and the word late is in part a reference to their presence, as this chapter will go on to show. This thesis also argues that there is value in maintaining the term postmodern in a conceptualisation of the present moment. Critical and questioning impulses, eclecticism, irony and intertextuality, all associated with postmodernism in a range of definitions of the term, can still be identified now, not least in Fisher’s own work, which covers an impressive array of culture and thinking. Before clarifying the use of the modifier late in the term late postmodern culture, one more theorist’s work will be examined to support the argument that capitalism, postmodernism, death and the dead are all intricately connected in the current milieu.

### **Baudrillard on capitalism and death**

Baudrillard’s arguments in *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (1976) are largely adherent to the death denial thesis examined in chapter two in that he positions modernity as having brought about the “exclusion of the dead and of death.”<sup>155</sup> However, reference to Baudrillard’s work is included in this chapter for three reasons. First, because of the importance of the relationship he paints between capitalism and death. Second, because of the relevance of his argument that modernity discriminates against the dead to the argument made here that late postmodern culture has within it an impulse to account for and hold itself accountable to the dead; and third, and more simply, because Baudrillard is so often associated with postmodernism. Gane has argued that Baudrillard’s writings have been “generally extremely hostile to postmodernism” and he questions the positioning of Baudrillard as a postmodern thinker.<sup>156</sup> However, there is no doubt that he is considered an important name in postmodern theory.

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<sup>151</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>155</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (London: Sage, 1993), 126.

<sup>156</sup> Mike Gane, “Introduction,” in Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, ix.

*Symbolic Exchange and Death* is perhaps first and foremost an explicit rejection of Marxism, psychoanalysis and, more broadly, modernity. Baudrillard claims that “Marxism is only the disenchanted horizon of capital,” failing to go beyond the restraints of capital to a society that operates on a (pre-modern) system of symbolic exchange rather than commodity exchange.<sup>157</sup> Baudrillard can be understood as adherent to the death denial thesis examined in chapter two because he writes that “little by little, *the dead cease to exist*” in the process of “evolution from savage societies to our own.”<sup>158</sup> He positions “the elimination of death” as “our phantasm,” stating that “our whole culture is just one huge effort to dissociate life and death.”<sup>159</sup> Baudrillard explicitly states that “today, *it is not normal to be dead*, and this is new.”<sup>160</sup> He relates this argument to Foucault’s “genealogy of discrimination” in which modernity is characterised by the segregation of those deemed abnormal, mad, or criminal “on the basis of an increasingly racist definition of the ‘normal human.’”<sup>161</sup> He writes:

the factory no longer exists because labour is everywhere; the prison no longer exists because arrests and confinements pervade social space-time; the asylum no longer exists because psychological control and therapy have been generalised and become banal; the school no longer exists because every strand of social progress is shot through with discipline and pedagogical training; capital no longer exists (nor does its Marxist critique) because the law of value has collapsed into self-managed survival in all its forms, etc., etc. The cemetery no longer exists because modern cities have entirely taken over their function: they are ghost towns, cities of death. If the great operational metropolis is the final form of an entire culture, then quite simply, ours is a culture of death.<sup>162</sup>

This culture of death emerges largely because labour’s exchange for capital is a “slow death.”<sup>163</sup> For Baudrillard “a man must die to become labour power,” converting this “death into a wage.”<sup>164</sup> This is not a “violent or physical death” but a symbolic one, brought about because “the equivalence of wages and labour power presupposes the death of the worker.”<sup>165</sup> As such, “labour is opposed *as a slow death* to a violent death.”<sup>166</sup> To illustrate this point Baudrillard gives the example of prisoners of war. To be put to death upon capture would be an “honour,” to be spared, giving labour power in a slow, deferred death, a worse fate.<sup>167</sup> To be freed in order to work in the capitalist system would be both a continuation and intensification of this fate, as consumption becomes yet more labour. Given

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<sup>157</sup> Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, 6.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, 126. Italics in original.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, 126. Italics in original.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.* Italics in original.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*



a wage to spend, “in the consumption or use of objects, the wage-consumer finds herself reproducing exactly *the same symbolic relation of slow death as she undergoes in labour*.”<sup>168</sup>

Baudrillard presents a striking and dystopian picture of capitalist societies as ones in which death is sewn into the fabric of every exchange. He also, arguably, valorises death and sacrifice as a way to subvert bourgeois, modern values of self-preservation and utility, writing that in “a system which adds up living and capitalizes life, the death drive is the only alternative.”<sup>169</sup> Kellner points out that Baudrillard’s argument has particularly “sinister implications in an era of suicide bombings and terrorism.”<sup>170</sup> Yet Baudrillard is also offering a critique of a society that “discriminates against the dead,” suggesting that the dead should be incorporated into everyday life through symbolic exchanges, a practice he associates with pre-modern societies.<sup>171</sup> As Ai-Ling Lai points out, “Baudrillard is convinced that the return to the symbolic will abolish the demarcation between life and death” and restore its “social significance.”<sup>172</sup> He argues that though the dead are denied in modernity, discriminated against in capitalist societies which seek to eliminate them and focus instead on accumulation (of capital, of life as length of time lived), death is integral to both modernity and capitalism, built into all economic exchange. This thesis does not adhere to the notion that death is denied in late postmodern culture, and chapter two complicates the notion that it ever was in any other period. Rather, it is argued here that death is built into the structures of late postmodern culture, though in a somewhat different way to that which Baudrillard suggests it was in modernity.

### **Late postmodern culture: capitalism, postmodernism, death and the dead**

Whilst death is built into the structures of contemporary capitalism in a range of different ways, both symbolic and literal, this thesis suggests that a cultural impulse to address what Baudrillard terms discrimination against the dead has also begun to emerge in a range of texts and practices, challenging the ingrained public wisdom that death and the dead are denied in the west. Will Self has pointed out, as is examined in detail in chapter four, that it is perhaps surprising that “in our modern secular and avowedly inclusive society we have wilfully allowed the dead to be so gagged,” or that “in an era when every minority is, at least in theory, listened to, we have turned our backs on

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<sup>168</sup> Ibid., 42. Italics in original.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid., 177.

<sup>170</sup> Douglas Kellner, “Jean Baudrillard,” *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* March 7, 2007, accessed June 21, 2020, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ baudrillard/>

<sup>171</sup> Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, 144.

<sup>172</sup> Ai-Ling Lai, “The ‘mortal coil’ and the political economy of death: A critical engagement with Baudrillard,” in *Death in a Consumer Culture*, 272.

the great majority and rendered them silent.”<sup>173</sup> Whereas Baudrillard argued that there was an inherent connection between capitalist exchange and death, this thesis argues that there is also an inherent connection between postmodernism (already established here as inseparable from capitalism), death and the dead. Postmodernism’s valuing of voices from the margins and its embracing of difference, diversity and plurality might be what has made it so easily exploitable for capitalist gain, but it is also what makes it so hospitable to the voices and presence of the dead.

To some extent, it is unsurprising and unremarkable that the dead are an important feature of late postmodern culture because, as Fisher points out, we are in a stage of capitalism that insists that everything is brought into the market. For him, “the power of capitalist realism derives in part from the way that capitalism subsumes and consumes all of previous history.”<sup>174</sup> This is “one effect of its ‘system of equivalence’ which can assign all cultural objects, whether they are religious iconography, pornography, or *Das Kapital*, a monetary value.”<sup>175</sup> As Penfold-Mounce argues in relation to the posthumous careers of celebrities, the dead themselves have now become a very valuable commodity and can continue to work after death (via their image, voice recordings and holograms, for example). As such, “being dead does not undermine celebrities as a consumable good and can, in fact, make them more consumable,” able to “exceed” in death “their economic value in life.”<sup>176</sup> The dead frequent late postmodern culture because it is profitable (for the living) for them to do so.

Arundhati Roy has also argued that capitalism has given rise to the dead, though in quite different ways. Roy’s *Capitalism: A Ghost Story* (2014) emphasises in its title the central place of the spectral in the current cultural moment. Writing about capitalism in India, she maps the rampant inequality and environmental destruction that capital accumulation has caused. She examines the consequences being wrought by companies seeking profit in the country and writes that capitalism’s “‘gravediggers’ may end up being its own delusional cardinals” because “despite their strategic brilliance, they seem to have trouble grasping a simple fact: Capitalism is destroying the planet. The two old tricks that dug it out of past crises – War and Shopping – simply will not work.”<sup>177</sup> She

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<sup>173</sup> Will Self, “It’s always the others who die,” *A Point of View*, BBC Radio 4, December 8, 2013, accessed June 21, 2020, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b03k2gr3>

<sup>174</sup> Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 4.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid.

<sup>176</sup> Penfold-Mounce, *Death, the Dead and Popular Culture*, 27.

<sup>177</sup> Arundhati Roy, *Capitalism: A Ghost Story* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2014), 46. Roy is echoing here a phrase from *The Communist Manifesto* that reads: “what the bourgeoisie therefore produces, above all, are its own grave-diggers.” Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (London: Pluto Press, 2008), 69.

documents the discovery of mass unmarked graves and raises the idea that as the consequences of capitalism continue to emerge, “it will not just be dead humans, it will be the dead land, dead rivers, dead mountains, and dead creatures in dead forests that will insist on a hearing.”<sup>178</sup> She suggests that as the ramifications of capitalism for the planet and for populations become more and more apparent, the dead will begin to speak up, seeking justice and calling on the living to take responsibility. As Jacque Lynn Foltyn has made clear, “rights before the law” are already “being extended to the formerly living,”<sup>179</sup> with a particularly evident example being the repatriation of human remains.<sup>180</sup> The dead are present in late postmodern culture – speaking, working, and being afforded rights.

The voices of the dead and a wide range of engagement with death are present in late postmodern culture. In some ways, this is where the understanding of late postmodern culture presented here deviates most from Jameson’s understanding of postmodernism. Jameson understood postmodernism largely as a weakening or indeed crisis of historicity “both in our relationship to public History and in the new forms of private temporality.”<sup>181</sup> This thesis identifies a significant concern with history, the past and in particular the voices of the dead in a range of texts, in a breadth of recent theory and in late postmodern culture more broadly. Postmodernism in its broadest possible sense is deemed here to be hospitable to the dead, both in terms of capitalism’s profit driven inclusion of the dead and postmodern impulses to hear voices from the margins.

### **Why late?**

There are various reasons for selecting the word late for use in the term late postmodern culture. Firstly, there is an apparent concern with lateness, with endings that are about to arrive but never quite do and with notions of cultural exhaustion, in a range of recent theory. David Buckingham has pointed out that “the metaphor of ‘death’ is everywhere around us” as “books about the death of childhood sit alongside those about the death of the self, of society, of ideology, and of history.”<sup>182</sup> Jameson in some ways defined postmodernism as a kind of perpetual anticipation of the end, an “inverted millenarianism” wherein

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<sup>178</sup> Roy, *Capitalism*, 65.

<sup>179</sup> Jacque Lynn Foltyn, “The corpse in contemporary culture: Identifying, transacting, and recoding the dead body in the twenty-first century,” *Mortality* 13:2 (2008): 100, doi: 10.1080/13576270801954351

<sup>180</sup> For a discussion of the Torres Strait Islanders case and other examples of the repatriation of human remains, see Maev Kennedy, “Natural History Museum returns bones of 138 Torres Strait Islanders,” *The Guardian*, March 10, 2011, accessed June 21, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2011/mar/10/museum-returns-torres-strait-islanders-bones>

<sup>181</sup> Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 6.

<sup>182</sup> David Buckingham, *After the Death of Childhood: Growing Up in the Age of Electronic Media* (Cambridge and Malden: Polity Press, 2000), 6.

premonitions of the future, catastrophic or redemptive, have been replaced by senses of the end of this or that (the end of ideology, art, or social class; the 'crisis' of Leninism, social democracy, or the welfare state, etc., etc.); taken together, all of these perhaps constitute what is increasingly called postmodernism.<sup>183</sup>

Though Jameson does not cite him directly here, an obvious example might be Fukuyama's famous, hopeful exaltation of the triumph of the west and of liberal democracy.<sup>184</sup> Fisher argues that though Fukuyama's argument may well be "widely derided" in academic circles and by political elites it is "accepted, even assumed, at the level of the cultural unconscious," where, as already discussed, any notion of political or economic alternatives to the status quo are unimaginable.<sup>185</sup> Peter Boxall also explores the relationship between what he terms "late modernity" and what he defines as "late style" in fiction.<sup>186</sup> He draws attention to a "deeply ingrained sense of cultural agedness that has characterised the historical mood of the last several decades," but argues that the phenomenon is in tension "with the equally powerful conception of our age as a period of unprecedented novelty."<sup>187</sup> He identifies a diverse range of theorists as having "registered what Frank Kermode has succinctly characterized as a 'sense of an ending' in our collective historical consciousness."<sup>188</sup> Boxall notes how "the recurrence of the adjective *late* in compounds such as 'late capitalism,' 'late modernism,' and 'late modernity,' and the experience of aftermath so powerfully evoked by the application of the prefix *post* to virtually all aspects of Western cultural life" accentuate the tone of finality and create a pervasive feeling of being in the wake of something.<sup>189</sup> The term zombie, as Luckhurst points out, "has become a standard adjectival modifier" to signify the return of so many things thought to have been dead and buried, perhaps because it is too late for anything new.<sup>190</sup> Cobley has suggested that contemporary fiction can also be seen to demonstrate a kind of pre-apocalyptic weariness, as if "history as a steadily unfolding series of events" might be about to cease.<sup>191</sup>

Green uses the modifier late in his book *Late Postmodernism: American Fiction at the Millennium* (2005), associating late postmodernism with novels written in the US in the 1990s. He utilises the term in a way that disrupts any postmodernism/postmodernity divide, suggesting that "late postmodernism is less a typology by which new writing might be categorized, than an attempt

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<sup>183</sup> Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 1.

<sup>184</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1992).

<sup>185</sup> Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 6.

<sup>186</sup> Peter Boxall, "Late: Fictional Time in the Twenty-First Century," *Contemporary Literature* 53.4 (2012): 681, doi: 10.1353/cli.2012.0038

<sup>187</sup> Ibid.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid. Italics in original.

<sup>190</sup> Luckhurst, *Zombies*, 8.

<sup>191</sup> Paul Cobley, *Narrative*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), 182.

to comprehend the conditions under which literary novels are now written and understood.”<sup>192</sup> Green uses the term to refer both to the novels he discusses and also to the social, economic and cultural conditions from which they have emerged, conditions which “shape the readership, the literary and political ideologies, the self-understanding, and the aesthetic choices available to writers,” and in this sense his definition is akin to Jameson’s.<sup>193</sup> He adds the modifier late because he feels “the gesture is useful if it signals that we are no longer postmodern in quite the same way as when the concept was first set loose,” echoing Nealon and Fisher’s sentiments that something has changed – become intensified, embedded, ingrained.<sup>194</sup> However, the adoption of the adjective late to signify the current state of affairs is not without its problems. As Nealon has remarked, “the neo-Marxist hope” inscribed in Jameson’s subtitle to *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* in 1991 can seem “a kind of cruel joke in the world of globalization.”<sup>195</sup> Jameson’s use of the word late implied it might be nearly over, but it is evident that “in the present moment, capitalism seems nowhere near the point of exhaustion.”<sup>196</sup> Jameson took the term from Mandel, whose *Late Capitalism* (1972) examined the nature of post-war capitalism. Mandel regretted from the outset “not being able to propose a better term for this historical era,” critiquing it in particular for being “one of chronology, not of synthesis.”<sup>197</sup> Late was used to mean recent in the text but, as Kundel has noted, “the term naturally also suggests obsolescence.”<sup>198</sup> As discussed above in relation to Nealon, though capitalism itself seems far from obsolete, obsolescence is central to contemporary capitalism. This is true at the level of products, something which recent ‘right to repair’ legislation is seeking to address, and people.<sup>199</sup> As Harvey argues, “under neoliberalization, the figure of the ‘disposable worker’ emerges as prototypical upon the world stage.”<sup>200</sup> Bales has offered an in-depth study of this phenomenon.<sup>201</sup>

Kundel speculates that misplaced Marxist triumphalism had consequences for the reception of both Jameson’s and Mandel’s theories, querying “who could believe in 1991 [...] that capitalism was on its last legs?” However, Kundel recognises that this was never Jameson’s conviction. Jameson

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<sup>192</sup> Green, *Late Postmodernism*, 3.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>195</sup> Nealon, *Post-Postmodernism*, 15.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid.

<sup>197</sup> Ernest Mandel, *Late Capitalism*, trans. Joris De Bres (London and New York: Verso, 1978), 9.

<sup>198</sup> Benjamin Kundel, “Into the Big Tent,” *London Review of Books* 32.8, April 22, 2010: 12, accessed June 21, 2020, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v32/n08/benjamin-kunkel/into-the-big-tent>

<sup>199</sup> Roger Harrabin, “Climate Change: ‘Right to Repair’ Gathers Force,” BBC, January 9, 2019, accessed June 21, 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-46797396>

<sup>200</sup> Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 169.

<sup>201</sup> Kevin Bales, *Disposable People: New Slavery in the Global Economy*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (California: University of California Press, 2012).

understood late capitalism to be “the dawn, not the dusk, of a thoroughgoing capitalism.”<sup>202</sup> The term late capitalism has since become quite popular. It has its own Twitter account (@humansoflate) as well as its own Reddit, Tumblr and Facebook pages, all sharing photographs of things that are particularly ‘late capitalist.’ Recent tweets include an advertisement for fake eyelashes for dogs. There is a strong focus on consumerism as well as surveillance, hi-tech weaponry and retweets of Donald Trump. Lowrey considers why the term has become popular, defining it as a catchall for “incidents that capture the tragicomic inanity and inequity of contemporary capitalism” such as “Nordstrom selling jeans with fake mud on them for \$425.”<sup>203</sup> Lowrey speaks to Jameson about his own use of the term and considers its origins in critical theory and Marxism. She points out that nobody she spoke with, including Jameson, “seemed to care” if it had travelled far from its meanings in different theoretical texts.<sup>204</sup> Though Lowrey quips that “this late capitalism is today’s [...] at least until the brands get ahold of it,” the article seems hopeful that the late in late capitalism might actually mean nearing the end of capitalism, making a series of references to the revolutionary potential she feels it signals.<sup>205</sup>

Edward Said uses the word late to describe a style in music and literature in *On Late Style: Music and Literature Against the Grain* (2007). Said died in 2003 whilst in the process of writing the then posthumously published study. Central to lateness for Said was “the idea that one cannot really go beyond lateness at all, cannot transcend or lift oneself out of lateness, but can only deepen the lateness [...] Lateness is being at the end, fully conscious, full of memory, and also very (even preternaturally) aware of the present.”<sup>206</sup> This thesis argues that such a sense of lateness has now become pervasive. It is visible in the theoretical texts examined here, specifically in Fisher’s and Nealon’s, both of which identify a change that registers as an intensification, in which postmodernism as the cultural logic of late capitalism has become insurmountable, ingrained to the point of no return. It is visible in a wide range of theory concerned with history, memory and the past to be considered in this thesis. It is clear in a preoccupation with being ‘at the end’ of something (and everything) that Boxall and Nealon draw attention to, and in post-apocalyptic fantasies and frequent cultural pronouncements of the death of the novel, photography, postmodernism and so on. In addition to this, there is a lateness resonant with Said’s definition of it as being “at the end,

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<sup>202</sup> Benjamin Kunkel, “Into the Big Tent,” *London Review of Books* 32.8, April 22, 2010: 12, accessed June 21, 2020, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v32/n08/benjamin-kunkel/into-the-big-tent>

<sup>203</sup> Annie Lowrey, “Why the Phrase ‘Late Capitalism’ is Suddenly Everywhere,” *The Atlantic*, May 17, 2017, accessed June 21, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2017/05/late-capitalism/524943/>

<sup>204</sup> Ibid.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid.

<sup>206</sup> Edward W. Said, *On Late Style: Music and Literature Against the Grain* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), 13-14.

fully conscious, full of memory, and also very (even preternaturally) aware of the present” evident in the autobiographical and visual texts examined in chapters four and five of this thesis, wherein an explicit concern with memory and remembering can be identified, as can a concern with the presence of the dead in the present.<sup>207</sup>

Said wrote that the work he defined as exemplary of late style often militated against its own time. However, he also argued that each piece of writing, each piece of music, “for all its irreducible individuality, is nevertheless a part – or, paradoxically, not a part – of the era in which it was produced and appeared.”<sup>208</sup> Some of the texts examined in this thesis have a complicated relationship to the present in part because they engage explicitly with death, dying and the dead in what some argue is, as the next chapter will demonstrate, a cultural milieu of death denial. Yet this thesis argues that a concern with death and the dead is, despite the prevalence of what Foltyn calls the well-rehearsed “mantra” of death denial in her own critique of it, much more widespread than many suggest.<sup>209</sup> This concern with death and the dead is another reason for the choice of the term late postmodern culture to denote the current moment. The modifier late not only offers a nod to Jameson and his conception of postmodernism as the cultural logic of late capitalism, but also gestures toward the centrality of death and the dead to the milieu it seeks to designate.

Late is often used as a neologism for dead. As such the term late postmodern culture positions the dead as central to it. It also acknowledges that, in some ways, postmodernism is dead, or at least has been accused of being dead quite enough to be believably so. Late clearly means a delayed arrival, and as such perhaps connotes the lateness of whatever is supposed to come after postmodernism. Late also implies recency (as in lately) as well as being late into something (late in the day, late in the game). It seems there are very many things lately which might be described as both postmodern and/or postmodernist (reality television, the texts examined in this thesis). Late might also have connotations of life, in particular for women, for whom the phrase ‘I’m late’ might indicate a missed menstrual cycle and the possibility of birth, or a new stage with the onset of menopause – in terms of postmodernism, this dual connotation of endings and beginnings might mean that there is still something more to come for and from postmodernism. Finally, the decision to continue to adopt the term postmodern and to position the theoretical insights afforded by it as useful when it has by some already been declared dead makes it possible to reinforce the idea that

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<sup>207</sup> Ibid.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid., 134.

<sup>209</sup> Jacque Lynn Foltyn, “Dead famous and dead sexy: Popular culture, forensics, and the rise of the corpse,” *Mortality* 13:2 (2008): 169, doi: 10.1080/13576270801954468

even if something is dead, this does not mean it is no longer relevant or that it no longer has value, or something to say. One of the key ideas examined in this thesis is that, as Roy puts it, “the dead have begun to speak up” in late postmodern culture.<sup>210</sup> Postmodernism, as Butler has pointed out, has always sought “to look to the margin, to the repressed, to the excluded, and to argue for a subversion or reversal of dominant values,” and as such it was perhaps always hospitable to the dead.<sup>211</sup> This thesis argues that the convergence of postmodernism with capitalism has only made it more so.

## Conclusion

This chapter has explored definitions of postmodernism and post-postmodernisms and defined the term late postmodern culture. It has been argued that capitalism and postmodernism have together made for a cultural context hospitable to the dead, and that death is built into the structures of late postmodern culture in a variety of ways. Late capitalism brings everything into the market, including death and the dead, as both have become, as this thesis will go on to show, highly commercially successful. Late capitalism’s demand for obsolescence, both in terms of products and in terms of its treatment of people, make death central to its structures. Postmodernism, however, has a foundational concern with voices from the margins, difference and cultural levelling (of high and low culture) which has helped to disintegrate the boundaries and hierarchies between the living and the dead. Capitalism has facilitated the commercialisation of such impulses. Postmodernism has been positioned here in relation to lack, loss, death and melancholy, both in this chapter and in the writing drawn on throughout it. As the thesis develops, the notion of late postmodern culture as melancholy will be explored in relation to ideas of a productive melancholy, focused on engagement with the dead. Here, the pitfalls of periodisations such as late postmodern culture have been acknowledged. As John McGowan writes, “people who are differently situated socially are going to live in the same time period, even use the same buildings and institutions, in very different ways.”<sup>212</sup> Nothing can be wholly explained by theory. Despite their limitations, however, periodising concepts can help us to try to ‘make sense,’ perhaps explaining theory’s continued appeal across a range of disciplines. Late postmodern culture is not understood here as one more epoch in a succession of epochs that forms a progressive trajectory. Rather, it is a partial, flawed but also evaluative and useful term for a set of social, cultural and political conditions marked by death, loss and obsolescence and, as this thesis will

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<sup>210</sup> Roy, *Capitalism*, 60.

<sup>211</sup> Christopher Butler, *Postmodernism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 105.

<sup>212</sup> John McGowan, “They might have been giants,” in *Postmodernism what moment?* ed. Pelagia Goulimari (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 94.



go on to argue, a clear impulse to engage with death and the dead. The next chapter will examine the argument that rather than being prominent in the contemporary cultural *zeitgeist*, death is, at present, denied in the west.

## Chapter Two: The Presence of Death and the Dead in Late Postmodern Culture

*Death is everywhere and nowhere in contemporary Western culture.*

Michele Aaron<sup>1</sup>

This chapter situates death and the dead within late postmodern culture. Despite compelling evidence to suggest it is a hospitable environment for engagement with death and the dead, a narrative of the west as oriented toward death denial remains dominant. The expression the west was discussed in the introduction, where it was positioned as being understood in this thesis as a shifting, contextual and ideological idea, rather than a concrete phenomenon or a simple geographical term. Some of the ways in which it is utilised by the different authors considered in this chapter will emphasise the varied and sometimes incompatible ways in which the expression has been employed in relation to notions of death denial and taboo. Though a significant concern with death and the dead can be identified in popular culture, literature, theory, academia, news media and in what is often termed the death positive movement, much of this engagement is justified in relation to the notion that it operates within a broader context of death denial and, as such, the thesis of death denial is often reinforced in the very same spaces where it is challenged. This continues to fuel the widespread public wisdom that death is taboo, sequestered and denied. This chapter argues that this positioning has fuelled the commodification of death and its establishing as fashionable, chic or cool in late postmodern culture alongside a continued narrative of denial. A range of texts challenging the death denial thesis as well as those that can be read as affirming it are considered. By engaging with the death denial argument and giving it prominence, it is once more repeated. However, as Badmington points out, repetition “can be a form of questioning: to restate is not always to reinstate.”<sup>2</sup> Efforts are made to maintain broad engagement with work from different disciplines, supporting the conviction that death studies can benefit from such an endeavour, whilst also drawing in examples from literary sources, popular culture, news media and beyond. The chapter also examines the relationships between postmodernism and the denial and commodification of death. Hutcheon has argued that postmodernism is “a phenomenon whose mode is resolutely contradictory as well as unavoidably political.”<sup>3</sup> Here it is argued

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<sup>1</sup> Michele Aaron, *Death and the Moving Image: Ideology, Iconography and I* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Badmington, “Theorizing Posthumanism,” 16.

<sup>3</sup> Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, 1.

that death can be understood in this way too, emphasising the ambivalent, contradictory and political dimensions of the treatment of death and the dead in late postmodern culture.

## Death denial

The death denial thesis is generally accepted as having been established in academia between the 1950s and the 1990s.<sup>4</sup> It maintains a powerful hold today. It has also been central to the development of the field of death studies – the broad, interdisciplinary endeavour in which this thesis is situated. Zimmermann and Rodin point out that since its first articulation in what are now regarded as the seminal texts on death denial there has also been a practical movement associated with it. They write that “during the same approximate time period” as the death denial thesis was emerging “the hospice and palliative care movements were developing and in part directed themselves against the perceived denial of death in western society.”<sup>5</sup> From its outset, the thesis was complicated. It found both support and challenge within academic circles and was immediately associated with a practical movement seeking to counter the attitudes toward death its proponents argued were so prevalent.

The most prominently cited author in relation to death denial is perhaps the French historian Phillipe Ariès. Ariès advanced the view that, during the twentieth century, death became “*unnameable*” in western culture.<sup>6</sup> He traced shifting attitudes from ‘primitive’ ones to those evident in the late twentieth century, arguing that modernity had led to death becoming “forbidden” and painting a somewhat romantic picture of attitudes toward death prior to this.<sup>7</sup> Ariès broad epochs, which Walter describes as “apparently sweeping across Europe regardless of culture or religion,” have been heavily criticised.<sup>8</sup> As discussed in the introduction, Ariès seems to be using the expression western to refer predominantly to Western Europe and the United States of America. The way that Ariès depicts “modern

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<sup>4</sup> For an overview of the death denial thesis in history and sociology which acknowledges its roots in psychoanalysis, see Robert and Tradii, who trace how it developed from the 1930s to the 1980s, positioning the earliest works on death denial earlier. They summarise challenges to the death denial thesis predominantly since the late 1970s in a separate article. Martin Robert and Laura Tradii, “Do we deny death? I. A genealogy of death denial,” *Mortality* 24.3 (2017), doi: 10.1080/13576275.2017.1415318; Laura Tradii and Martin Robert, “Critiques of the death-denial thesis,” *Mortality* 24.4 (2019) doi: 10.1080/13576275.2017.1415319

<sup>5</sup> Camilla Zimmermann and Gary Rodin, “The denial of death thesis sociological critique and implications for palliative care,” *Palliative Medicine* 18 (2004): 123. doi: [doi.org/10.1191/0269216304pm8580a](https://doi.org/10.1191/0269216304pm8580a)

<sup>6</sup> Phillipe Ariès, *Western Attitudes Toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present*, trans. Patricia M. Ranum (London and New York: Marion Boyars, 1976), 106. Italics in original.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>8</sup> Tony Walter, “Modern Death: Taboo or Not Taboo?” *Sociology* 25.2 (1991): 297, doi: 10.1177/0038038591025002009

America as the final chapter of a unilinear European history” has been key to criticism of his work by Tony Walter.<sup>9</sup> Roy Porter has noted that there is “not one single, but many histories of death” and emphasised that Ariès “gives us but a partial story, and a skewed one at that.”<sup>10</sup> However, Porter also acknowledges that “Ariès remains the doyen of the historians of death.”<sup>11</sup> His work continues to be adopted and developed.

English anthropologist Geoffrey Gorer’s slightly earlier work on death denial has also been widely cited. Gorer claimed that death came to be positioned as taboo during the twentieth century. He wrote a brief essay titled ‘The Pornography of Death’ in 1955 whilst living in the US, arguing that “the natural processes of corruption and decay” had become “as disgusting as the natural processes of birth and copulation were a century ago.”<sup>12</sup> Baudrillard, discussed in chapter one, can be understood to adhere to the death denial thesis in a similar manner to Gorer, given Baudrillard argues that in modernity death became “pornographic” and “obscene and awkward.”<sup>13</sup> Gorer considered the image of “violent death” to be playing “an ever-growing part in the fantasies offered to mass audiences” whilst routine, quotidian death became “smothered in prudery” and made “unmentionable.”<sup>14</sup> In some ways Gorer’s views were prescient. As Foltyn has argued, “today’s fictive cadavers are imbued with verisimilitude in ways that would have shocked Gorer.”<sup>15</sup> After his influential 1955 essay, Gorer returned to England and published a detailed qualitative study of shifting mourning practices in Britain.<sup>16</sup> However, this text has not captured the imagination of death scholars as much as his earlier essay.

The appeal of Gorer’s essay perhaps owes something to its explicit positioning of death as taboo and akin to sex in the cultural imagination. Herman Feifel, writing in the US around the same time, also made this comparison.<sup>17</sup> Walter positions Gorer’s 1955 essay as the possible starting point of frequent proclamations in at least the British media of the idea that death is taboo.<sup>18</sup> The notion of death as taboo is closely bound to the notion of death

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Roy Porter, “The hour of Philippe Ariès,” *Mortality* 4.1 (1999): 88, doi: 10.1080/713685963

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Geoffrey Gorer, “The Pornography of Death,” in *Death, Grief and Mourning in contemporary Britain* (London: The Cresset Press, 1965), 172.

<sup>13</sup> Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, 182, 184.

<sup>14</sup> Gorer, “The Pornography of Death,” 173.

<sup>15</sup> Foltyn, “Dead famous and dead sexy,” 164.

<sup>16</sup> Gorer, *Death, Grief and Mourning in contemporary Britain*.

<sup>17</sup> Herman Feifel, “Introduction,” in *The Meaning of Death* ed. Herman Feifel (New York: McGraw Hill, 1965), xii.

<sup>18</sup> Walter, “Modern Death,” 294.

denial in the popular imagination and public wisdom, as this chapter will later show when considering a range of recent examples of popular media engagement with death. However, the notion of death as taboo is also distinct from the notion of death as denied. Brodersen has explored how the term taboo has attracted academic interest because of its ambiguity of meaning and the ways in which it emerges in-between and across a wide range of academic disciplines and areas of study including anthropology, the study of religion, sociology, politics, psychology and psychoanalysis.<sup>19</sup> She explains that the term taboo itself denotes “untouchability” and as such the word successfully contains within it the difficulty of pinning it down.<sup>20</sup> In terms of the study of death, according to Walter, “in everyday usage, the word ‘taboo’ refers to something prohibited, forbidden, by custom rather than by law.”<sup>21</sup> In his analysis, focused predominantly on Britain and the United States of America, Walter points out that it is not clear exactly what it is that may not be mentioned or perhaps even considered, questioning whether it is death as a state, a process, one’s own death or that of another, corpses or something else. He focuses predominantly on the notion that death is something that cannot be discussed. Though Walter acknowledges that “evidence exists that death is impolite in some circles” he also emphasises that “the taboo thesis as commonly stated is grossly overdrawn and lacking in subtlety.”<sup>22</sup> He offers six alternative ways of understanding changing attitudes and practices toward death that either modify or critique the still popular notion of death as taboo, bringing in, for example, intersections of social class and individualism.

Walter also notes that the terms taboo and denial are “easily misused” in relation to death.<sup>23</sup> He describes death denial as a “stronger version” of the “weak taboo” of talking about death, and writes that as such it “may be something too terrible even to think of, its reality denied.”<sup>24</sup> He points out that the notion of death as denied is closely tied to Freud and, as this chapter will discuss, it is also tied to the work of those who have continued to develop the legacy of Freudian psychoanalysis. Walter concludes that social scientists were, by 1991, having “second thoughts” about the notion of death as taboo in general.<sup>25</sup> As this

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<sup>19</sup> Elizabeth Brodersen, *Taboo, Personal and Collective Representations: Origin and Positioning within Cultural Complexes* (London and New York: Routledge, 2019), 1.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Walter, “Modern Death,” 295.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 297.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 295.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 307.

chapter will go on to show, similar shifts away from the death denial thesis have also become evident in recent years. However, Walter emphasises that in 1991 popular pundits continued to identify death as a newly discovered taboo and suggests that many dying and bereaved people at the time agreed that death was in some sense taboo. This chapter will consider later how prevalent the notion of death as taboo remains in popular media sources in Britain, and suggests that in part this might be a consequence of a need across a range of sectors – the media, in academia and in charities – to very clearly justify value and impact.

Lee argues that if ever there really were a taboo around death in what he terms modernity, “there is now a proliferation of research on human mortality and academic programmes on death and dying as well as a lively concern with the near-death experience and after-death communications.”<sup>26</sup> Lee ties a shift away from what he describes as the twentieth century cliché of death as taboo in part to the emergence of death studies as a field of research, as well as to a keen interest in mortality and afterlives in the popular imagination and finally to the hospice movement. Though Lee suggests that death continues to be a conversational topic to be avoided in some spaces, he examines a range of “ideas and attitudes that seem to be contributing to new narratives of death instead of its denial,” here tying the idea of death as taboo closely to the idea of death as denied.<sup>27</sup> Lee positions what he understands as the decline of the death taboo in relation to the fields of parapsychology, New Age and near-death and, more broadly, to the sociological ideas of modernity, disenchantment and re-enchantment, identifying “modern relativism” as the “unacknowledged source of the death taboo.”<sup>28</sup> Lee also suggests that neoliberalism and shifting ideas about the self, considered in chapter three of this thesis, contribute to the ways in which “there is a political subtext to the revival of death and the apparent end of its taboo.”<sup>29</sup> Though Lee is cautious about whether there ever was a time or place when death was taboo in any simple or clear cut way, he also makes the point that “growing engagement with the question of death” in what he terms late modernity means that any taboo that may have been prevalent is “certainly no longer in effect.”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Raymond L.M. Lee, “Modernity, Mortality and Re-Enchantment: The Death Taboo Revisited,” *Sociology* 42.4 (2008): 746, doi:10.1177/0038038508091626

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 749.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 748.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 756.

Others have asserted that a taboo around death certainly did or perhaps still does exist, at least in some spaces, with Gibson and Zaidman arguing (with a focus on England) that “as children and adults began to live longer, death as a subject in books for the young became taboo.”<sup>31</sup> They observe that “as death moved out of the home and into the hospital, it also nearly disappeared from children’s books” and here they also draw on the idea of representations of death as pornographic, discussed in the next section.<sup>32</sup> Gibson and Zaidman are interested in affirming the value of books about death for people of all ages. Their work, like that of Walter and Lee, emphasises the ways in which the notion of taboo is relevant to the study of death in a range of different ways. The idea of taboo is here understood as something forbidden, avoided and not discussed, rather than something explicitly denied.

Rather than his emphasis on taboo, it may also be Gorer’s focus in 1955 on fictive and visual representations of ‘unnatural’ death that has made his work so popular in the context of the widespread proliferation of visual images of death and the dead on twenty-first century screens. Kate Berridge, in a book focused on her own argument about the end of the death taboo, has written that “in a visually led culture, the lens, the camera, the screen are integral to our exposure to representations of death” and “the modern pornography of death owes much more to the visual culture of photography, film and television” than Gorer’s did.<sup>33</sup> Relationships between death and the visual image are examined in more detail in chapter five. As this chapter will go on to discuss, some authors position the current preponderance of death on screen as an example of death’s denial, like Gorer seeing it as a form of disturbing and distracting pornography that has emerged as a consequence of and alongside the denial of death as “*a natural process*” in the twentieth century.<sup>34</sup> However, others pay close attention to the diversity of death and the dead in media and the moving image, or in what might be termed screen culture. They examine the presence of death and the dead in day-to-day life in the twenty-first century and argue that rather than being denied, they are all around us.

Straddling psychology and philosophy, Ernest Becker’s Pulitzer Prize winning *The*

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<sup>31</sup> Lois Rauch Gibson and Laura M. Zaidman, “Death in Children’s Literature: Taboo or Not Taboo?” *Children’s Literature Association Quarterly* 16.4 (1991): 232, doi: 10.1177/0038038508091626

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Kate Berridge, *Vigor Mortis: The End of the Death Taboo* (London: Profile books, 2001), 247.

<sup>34</sup> Gorer, “The Pornography of Death,” 172. Italics in original.

*Denial of Death* (1973) has been influential both in the field of death studies and beyond. Becker argues that the repression of death is not something associated with a particular cultural or historical phase. Rather, it is a core function of the human psyche. Becker deems it to be through cultural systems that people repress knowledge of their inevitable demise and argues that humans form cultural “hero-systems” to allow them to take part in something that will last forever.<sup>35</sup> People are deemed to produce what he terms *causa sui* or “immortality projects” to allow them “to earn a feeling of primary value, of cosmic specialness.”<sup>36</sup> This argument, according to Becker, accounts for religion and for ‘the need to believe’ Freud and Kristeva both explore.<sup>37</sup> The need for a feeling of primary value is deemed to originate in an innate fear of death. The sense of value required to repress that fear can be located in religion or in militaristic, political or family structures, in the workplace or, arguably increasingly in late postmodern culture, sublimated through consumerism. The need is considered core to the human condition, so for Becker “cultural relativity is in fact the relativity of hero-systems the world over.”<sup>38</sup> However, traditional “immortality projects” became increasingly difficult to locate in cultures characterised by secularism and loose family and employment structures, and in which, as chapter three will examine, the responsibility for producing a meaningful narrative of the self falls increasingly on the individual.<sup>39</sup>

Though Becker does not position death denial as the consequence of a particular historical period, he does emphasise its particular relevance in the aftermath of the twentieth century. Becker’s work can certainly be read as a critique of modernity. Allan Kellehear has written that Becker’s conception of death denial is a “late 20<sup>th</sup>-century response to the intellectual and spiritual ‘homelessness’ produced by secularisation.”<sup>40</sup> Tradii and Robert have also pointed out that much of what the death denial thesis finds fault with are the consequences of modernity, writing that “the narrative of death denial mourns the loss of pre-modern symbolic structures” that are positioned as having been replaced by

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<sup>35</sup> Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (London: Souvenir Press, 2011), 5.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Freud focused not on replacing religion but on sublimating the need to believe: “I am not thinking of a substitute for religion: this need must be sublimated.” Sigmund Freud, Letter from Sigmund Freud to C. G. Jung, February 13, 1910. *The Freud/Jung Letters: The Correspondence Between Sigmund Freud and C. G. Jung* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), 295-296; Kristeva is interested in the “prereligious need to believe.” Julia Kristeva, *The Incredible Need to Believe* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 12.

<sup>38</sup> Becker, *The Denial of Death*, 5.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Allan Kellehear, *A Social History of Dying* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 59.



a “dehumanising, mechanised, profit-oriented order.”<sup>41</sup> Mellor and Shilling in particular demonstrate a concern with the loss of metanarratives that they view as having supported engagement with death and dying in the past. They write that “death is so alarming in contemporary societies because modernity has deprived increasing numbers of people with the means of containing it in an overarching, existentially meaningful, ritual structure.”<sup>42</sup> Whereas postmodernism is often defined, as discussed in chapter one, as “incredulity toward metanarratives” the death denial thesis seems commensurate with a yearning for them, its proponents effusing an elegiac longing for the structures, rituals and order they associate with pre-modern times, when death is positioned as having been more familiar and bereavement better supported.<sup>43</sup>

Academic writers are not alone in exploring the notion of death denial in the contemporary west. Novelist Julian Barnes, whose autobiographical writing on death is examined in chapter four, has written extensively and explicitly about death. A section of his book *Nothing to be Frightened Of* (2008) was repackaged and titled *Death* (2017) for the Vintage Minis series, singling him out as an authority on death for the twenty-first century.<sup>44</sup> Barnes’s wife, the literary agent Pat Kavanagh, died in 2008. Though Barnes’s interest in writing about death predates Kavanagh’s death, this loss has been central to his writing since. Barnes summarises the breadth of the death denial argument in a review of Joyce Carol Oates’s *A Widow’s Story: A Memoir* (2011). Barnes writes:

we—we in the secularizing West, at least—have got less good at dealing with death, and therefore with its emotional consequences [...] death has come to be looked upon more as a medical failure than a human norm. It increasingly happens away from the home, in hospital, and is handled by a series of outside specialists—a matter for the professionals. But afterward we, the amateurs, the grief-struck, are left to deal with it—this unique, banal thing—as best we can. And there are now fewer social forms to surround and support the grief-bearer.<sup>45</sup>

Barnes communicates a profound sense of loss and echoes sentiments discernible in a wide range of academic literature that might be aligned with the death denial thesis. His view of death as medical failure resonates with a point made by Kellehear who, though his work has

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<sup>41</sup> Tradii and Robert, “Do we deny death? II,” 386.

<sup>42</sup> Philip A. Mellor and Chris Shilling, “Modernity, Self-identity and the sequestration of death,” *Sociology* 27.3 (1993): 427, doi: [10.1177/0038038593027003005](https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038593027003005)

<sup>43</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, xxiv.

<sup>44</sup> Julian Barnes, *Nothing to be Frightened Of* (London: Vintage, 2009); Julian Barnes, *Death* (London: Vintage, 2017).

<sup>45</sup> Julian Barnes, “For sorrow there is no remedy,” *The New York Review of Books*, April 7, 2011, accessed June 21, 2020, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2011/04/07/sorrow-there-no-remedy/>

argued for critical engagement with the concept of death denial,<sup>46</sup> also suggests that dying has in some ways “become a rather shameful affair,” something hidden away in hospitals and care homes and positioned as awkward and embarrassing.<sup>47</sup> Barnes’s focus on the professionalisation of death also supports Anthony Giddens’s assessment that “death has become a technical matter, its assessment removed into the hands of the medical profession,”<sup>48</sup> in turn echoing Ariès’s concern that modern death was becoming “a technical phenomenon obtained by a cessation of care.”<sup>49</sup> Writing literary prose that has no conventional need to reference or separate out central ideas, Barnes is able to offer a broad overview of the different factors at play when considering the twenty-first century west as one characterised by death denial – individualisation and isolation, technologisation, medicalisation and professionalisation all appear.

On the whole those who write about death denial tend to acknowledge in one way or another that the notion is overdetermined. No absolute or specific cause for a culture of death denial can be pinpointed (except for Becker, who sees death denial as a core to the human psyche). The list of factors attributed to the development of a social and cultural climate of death denial in the west usually includes the well documented shift toward secularism, or what Gilbert refers to as “the crises bred by the disappearance of a traditional God.”<sup>50</sup> The related decline in formalised mourning practices is frequently cited, though often nostalgically and without attention paid to the ways in which these were gendered, classed and prescriptive. The medicalisation of dying and the shift of death from the home into professionalised care settings is positioned as a key factor. In 2017, though surveys repeatedly found that most people wanted to die at home, almost half of deaths in England were in hospital, most of the others in a care home or hospice and less than a quarter at home.<sup>51</sup> Nor is this as straightforward as it may seem. As Renske Visser has discussed, ‘home’ is “a complex multi-layered concept” and as such, “‘home deaths’ potentially could occur in any setting, may it be the dwelling, hospital, nursing home or hospice.”<sup>52</sup> Baudrillard

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<sup>46</sup> Allan Kellehear, “Are we a ‘death-denying’ society? A sociological review,” *Social Science and Medicine* 19.9 (1984), doi: [0.1016/0277-9536\(84\)90094-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/0277-9536(84)90094-7)

<sup>47</sup> Kellehear, *A Social History of Dying*, 8.

<sup>48</sup> Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), 161.

<sup>49</sup> Ariès, *Western Attitudes Toward Death*, 88.

<sup>50</sup> Gilbert, *Death’s Door*, xx.

<sup>51</sup> Rachel Schraer, “Death in Data: What happens at the end of life?,” *BBC News*, May 19, 2018, accessed June 21, 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-44130143>

<sup>52</sup> Renske Visser, “Going Beyond the Dwelling: Challenging the Meaning of Home at the End of Life,” *Anthropology and Ageing* 40.1 (2019): 9, doi: 10.5195/aa.2019.215

attributes the shift to medical professionals caring for the dying as the reason why the majority of people no longer have the “opportunity to see somebody die.”<sup>53</sup> A typically, though by no means guaranteed, greater life expectancy is also deemed to have meant that, broadly speaking, most people in the west experience the death of others less frequently than they would have a hundred years ago in their communities and private lives. Yet, as this chapter will go on to discuss, they might be more frequently exposed to death in other ways. Most writing on death denial cites a general uneasiness in talking about death in public, though this is difficult to evidence and easily challenged. The British Social Attitudes survey, for example, found in 2012 that of those surveyed 70% felt comfortable talking about death, a rise of 2% from the still ample 68% in 2009.<sup>54</sup> One thing that seems clear is that many of the shifts and factors informing the death denial argument are associated with the twentieth century, which Paul Virilio referred to as the century of the “mass production of corpses.”<sup>55</sup>

Gilbert explicitly cites “the traumas of global warfare” as central to the reshaping of dying and mourning practices in the twentieth century, in which she considers “distinctively modern ways of dying, mourning, and memorializing” to have evolved.<sup>56</sup> She is particularly interested in how twentieth century elegists respond to what she describes as “the intransigent blankness of terminations that lead nowhere and promise nothing,” no longer able to rely on the notion of a “transcendental realm into which the souls of those they mourned might expire.”<sup>57</sup> Gilbert’s study *Death’s Door: Modern Dying and the Ways we Grieve* (2006), like many texts that might be aligned with death studies, is interdisciplinary. She describes the book as “in some sense experimental, mingling the techniques of different genres (autobiographical narrative, cultural studies, literary history)” and examining “the intersections among the personal, the cultural, and the literary.”<sup>58</sup> Gilbert began writing the book after “a long period of preoccupation with grave personal loss.”<sup>59</sup> Her husband died suddenly aged 33 after a routine operation. She points out that although she and her children received support from a network of friends, she also experienced a “persistent, barely conscious feeling” that she now “represented a serious social problem to everyone”

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<sup>53</sup> Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, 182.

<sup>54</sup> British Social Attitudes Survey, “Dying: Discussing and planning for end of life,” 2012, 22, accessed June 22, 2020, [http://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/media/38850/bsa\\_30\\_dying.pdf?\\_ga=2.6051763.1298193394.1541409003-2017144882.1541409003](http://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/media/38850/bsa_30_dying.pdf?_ga=2.6051763.1298193394.1541409003-2017144882.1541409003)

<sup>55</sup> Paul Virilio, *Ground Zero*, trans. C. Turner (London and New York: Verso, 2002), 14.

<sup>56</sup> Gilbert, *Death’s Door*, xx, xvii.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, xxi-xxii.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, xviii.

else around her.<sup>60</sup> After the loss she found herself “confronting the shock of a bereavement at a historical moment when death was in some sense unspeakable and grief – or anyway the expression of grief – was at best an embarrassment, at worst a social solecism or scandal.”<sup>61</sup> Though very different in genre and style to Barnes’s work, Gilbert’s book similarly includes reflection on her personal experience of bereavement. Gilbert’s contribution, like Barnes’s, adds weight to the argument that death is denied in the west, given her experience speaks to it. However, significant challenges to the death denial thesis have also been posed.

## Challenges

The most prominent critic of the death denial thesis to inform death studies may be Jonathan Dollimore. Dollimore argues that it erases “how profoundly formative the trauma of death has been in the formation of Western culture.”<sup>62</sup> Eagleton has described Dollimore’s *Death, Desire and Loss in Western Culture* (2001) as a “whirlwind trip around European thought” with a “distinctly potted feel” but is welcoming of Dollimore’s analysis, describing a poignant text that “has its emotional source in a profound sense of sorrow – that of a gay intellectual for whom the latest tragic conspiracy of death and desire lies in the catastrophe of Aids.”<sup>63</sup> Dollimore’s perspective as a gay man writing about death and those of Barnes and Gilbert as widowers all emphasise the importance of subject position to engagement with death. Dollimore’s identity in particular emphasises the ways in which death operates in people’s lives amid a range of intersections and, as this chapter will go on to discuss, the ways in which death has been politicised. A more recent example can be seen in Robin Campillo’s 2018 French language film *120 Beats Per Minute*, a drama about the AIDS crisis and gay activism, in which a central character holds up a sign reading “SILENCE = MORT.”<sup>64</sup> But for Dollimore, there has never been silence about death in western culture.

Dollimore explicitly states that “in philosophical and literary terms there has never been a denial of death.”<sup>65</sup> Challenging Gorer’s view expressed in 1955 that, despite having

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., xix.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Jonathan Dollimore, *Death, Desire and Loss in Western Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 123.

<sup>63</sup> Terry Eagleton, “Good dinners pass away, so do tyrants and toothache,” *London Review of Books* 20. 8, April 16, 1998: 13, accessed June 22, 2020, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v20/n08/terry-eagleton/good-dinners-pass-away-so-do-tyrants-and-toothache>

<sup>64</sup> *120 Beats Per Minute*, dir. Robin Campillo, Memento Films, 2017, Feature Film.

<sup>65</sup> Dollimore, *Death, Desire and Loss*, 126.

been a “set piece for most of the eminent Victorian and Edwardian writers,” he could not “recollect a novel or a play of the last twenty years or so which has a ‘death-bed scene’ in it,” Dollimore argues that in modernity a “continuing and intensifying preoccupation with death” can be identified in literature and philosophy.<sup>66</sup> More profoundly, Dollimore argues that the notion of a supposedly ‘healthy’ attitude toward death which needs to be worked toward, advocated in much of the writing associated with the death denial thesis, is inherently flawed. Dollimore accuses Ariès in particular of having expressed the underlying message that “in the West we have moved from a healthy relationship to death to a pathological one.”<sup>67</sup> Writing on death which expresses this kind of “hope for a healthy attitude to death and loss,” Dollimore writes, fails to acknowledge “on the personal level just how devastating and unendurable death is or can be for those who survive.”<sup>68</sup> Chapters four and five examine autobiographical and televisual texts that can be understood as engaging explicitly with the notion of death as unendurable.

A key criticism of the death denial thesis in the twenty-first century west is that death is in some ways all around us. Luckhurst has pointed out that “the spectacle of death is not confined to a ‘pornography’ of excessive ruination, but has become culturally ubiquitous.”<sup>69</sup> Penfold-Mounce has examined the place of death and the dead in popular culture, arguing that “the long-standing public wisdom that Western culture is comprised of death denial societies where death is taboo is contestable by the sheer volume and global presence of representations of death and the dead, albeit in fictional form.”<sup>70</sup> Penfold-Mounce has also critiqued the death denial thesis for other reasons, noting that its “origins in psychology and psychoanalysis” mean it “poses problems for people outside of these disciplinary approaches, particularly members of the public and sociological scholars.”<sup>71</sup> As a concept, it is focused on “generalisations of the individual without social context” and is problematic because its meaning is so unclear.<sup>72</sup> She points out that the death denial argument “has faced remarkably little cited opposition” with “much scholarship surrounding death denial” failing to “question its relevance, accuracy or boundaries,” leading to the

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., xxviii.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>69</sup> Roger Luckhurst, “Why have the dead come back? The instance of photography,” *New Formations* 89/90 (2016), 105, doi: [10.3898/NEWF:89/90.06.2016](https://doi.org/10.3898/NEWF:89/90.06.2016)

<sup>70</sup> Penfold-Mounce, *Death, the Dead and Popular Culture*, 114.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

replication and reiteration of the notion across disciplines and in the media to the extent that it is embraced as “public knowledge.”<sup>73</sup>

Darian Leader, a Freudian psychoanalyst, has emphasised the abundance of fiction addressing death and dying but measured this against what he deems a stark absence of writing on these topics in scientific and psychoanalytic literature, with the obvious exception of Freud.<sup>74</sup> Leader demonstrates the ways in which engagement with death can co-exist with a lack of engagement, depending on where you look. As Freud argued, the denial of death on a social level might in fact be compatible with abundant engagement with death and loss in fiction. Freud’s ‘Thoughts for the times on war and death’ (1915) suggests people turn to fictional engagement with death because of a broader social climate of death denial. Like Becker, whose work builds on Freud’s, Freud positions a belief in one’s own immortality as central to the human psyche (or more specifically for Freud the unconscious). However, he emphasises that this denial fails to support individuals to cope with their own inevitable losses. This was particularly the case during the First World War, when he reflected that death could “no longer be denied” given that war exposes the knowledge that “people really die” and “no longer one by one, but many, often ten thousand in a single day.”<sup>75</sup> Freud writes that if engagement with death was difficult to locate elsewhere, then it was “inevitable” that people would “seek in the world of fiction, in literature, and in the theatre compensation for what has been lost in life.”<sup>76</sup> This might account for what Dollimore argues was the increasing fascination with death in twentieth century literature. Increasingly exposed to death, people sought engagement with it and found it in the arts. Some death scholars have identified this essay by Freud as the first to put forward the death denial thesis.<sup>77</sup> However, Tammy Clewell suggests that the essay was progressive in “anticipating the kinds of anti-consolatory and anti-idealist mourning practices that have gained widespread current in the post-World War II era,” suggesting that it could also be positioned in opposition to the death denial thesis.<sup>78</sup> Anti-idealist practices that reject the notion of

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>74</sup> Darian Leader, *The New Black: Mourning, Melancholia and Depression* (London: Penguin, 2008).

<sup>75</sup> Sigmund Freud, “Thoughts for the times on war and death,” *Standard Edition*, 14: 291.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> See Robert and Tradii, “Do we deny death? I,” 4. Robert and Tradii refer to two essays by Freud published under the title *Reflections on War and Death* and date them at the end of the First World War in 1918. According to the *Standard Edition* the essays were written “round about March and April 1915, some six months after the outbreak of the first World War.”

<sup>78</sup> Tammy Clewell, “Mourning Beyond Melancholia: Freud’s Psychoanalysis of Loss,” *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* 53.1 (2004): 57.

'moving on' are examined in more detail in chapters four and five, which identify what might be understood as a productive melancholia in a range of texts and theory in late postmodern culture.

Diana Fuss argues that modernity led to a surge in the presence of the dead in poetry and emphasises the highly constructed nature of the death denial argument. She writes that "*In the early modern period*, so the story goes, people loved to talk about death; they relished the opportunity to give the grim reaper his due, commemorating human mortality in ritual, song, and speech."<sup>79</sup> She demonstrates, through an analysis of elegy, that at least in literary terms "people did not in fact fall silent in the face of a depersonalized and dehumanized death" in the twentieth century.<sup>80</sup> Rather, she argues:

they began speaking about the dead in new and increasingly creative ways. Poetry in particular, in response to the social decline of death, concentrated on reviving the dead through the vitalizing properties of speech. At the very moment in history that death merely appears to vanish from the public stage, the dying start manically versifying and the surviving begin loudly memorializing. Even the dead commence chattering away in poetry, as if to give the lie to modernity's premature proclamation of death's demise.<sup>81</sup>

Though Fuss might appear to support the notion that there was a "social decline of death" in the twentieth century in the above extract, her choice of the words "merely appear" undermines the argument, as does her suggestion that the dead in poetry "give the lie to modernity's premature proclamation of death's demise."<sup>82</sup> Fuss, drawing attention to the narrative of death denial, playfully destabilises it. One of the ways that modern poets engaged with the dead against a supposed backdrop of death denial was through what Fuss terms the corpse poem, which enacts a form of literary ventriloquism called *prosopopoeia* (giving a voice to something or someone imaginary, absent or dead). Corpse poems, she writes, have at their centre "a speaking cadaver, an instantiated figure endowed with the power of speech" and are not about the dead, but "spoken by the dead," offering "lyric utterances not from beyond the grave but inside it."<sup>83</sup> As Fuss argues, this kind of writing represents creative, if perhaps not widespread, engagement with death and the dead in the twentieth century and offers, in some ways, a challenge to the death denial thesis. Chapter

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<sup>79</sup> Diana Fuss, *Dying Modern: a meditation on elegy* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013), 1. Italics in original.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 44.

five argues that giving a voice to the dead is increasingly popular in late postmodern televisual narratives and examines potential reasons for this.

The literary, philosophical and popular cultural texts examined in academic research by Dollimore, Fuss and Penfold-Mounce undermine the death denial thesis. So, however, do the texts of Dollimore, Fuss and Penfold-Mounce themselves. These texts and the field of death studies to which they can be understood as contributing engender conversations about death and the dead, representing in both content and form a challenge to the thesis of death denial. Tradii and Robert have argued that death studies as a whole might now be “at a turn,” interested in new avenues of investigation and in contesting “the assumption that we live in death-denying societies.”<sup>84</sup> They view their own work in history and social anthropology as “focused on what the living have done with the dead,” implying they undertake the kind of engagement with death and the dead this thesis argues is increasingly prevalent in late postmodern culture, focused on responsibility and accounting for the treatment of the dead by the living.<sup>85</sup>

Though this thesis argues that western society is not characterised by death denial, it is also important to acknowledge that it probably never was in any straightforward way. This is partly due to the wide variation within the cultures and societies contained under the moniker of western, a term noted as problematic in the introduction. Ireland, for example, is designated a western country but attitudes to death and dying in Irish communities (within Ireland and elsewhere) are often contrasted with those in the west more broadly.<sup>86</sup> However, it is also, as Penfold-Mounce has made clear, due to the fact that the death denial argument is so vague.<sup>87</sup> Its boundaries are not agreed and its usage signals a range of possible meanings. Similarly, though this thesis seeks to advance the argument that late postmodern culture is characterised by engagement with rather than denial of death, it is also acknowledged that there remains a widely accepted and enduring public wisdom that death is denied, and that a range of contradictory, conflicting and complicated impulses and attitudes toward death exist within late postmodern culture. At present a range of scholars and popularly cited academic texts do continue to argue that death is denied in the west.

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<sup>84</sup> Tradii and Robert, “Do we deny death? II,” 386.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> See, for example, Kevin Toolis, “Why the Irish get death right,” *The Guardian*, September 9, 2017, accessed June 22, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2017/sep/09/why-the-irish-get-death-right>

<sup>87</sup> Penfold-Mounce, *Death, the Dead and Popular Culture*, 91-92.



Gitte Koksvik has suggested that “the death taboo and denial thesis is alive and well in the popular imagination.”<sup>88</sup> At this point, however, as Foltyn has pointed out, “the de facto argument that we live in a death denying culture is more mantra than fact.”<sup>89</sup>

### **The death denial thesis now**

At present, there seems to be a tension between the repetition and the contestation of the death denial thesis. The notion that death is denied tends to be re-inscribed in the very same spaces where attempts are made to challenge it. For example, 2018 saw a range of calls for people to talk about death in the UK, implying that it remains denied and taboo whilst calling for a shift in attitudes. The Sue Ryder charity called for a “national conversation” about dying<sup>90</sup> and *The Guardian* ran a headline titled “How our lives end must no longer be a taboo subject.”<sup>91</sup> In 2009 Terry Pratchett, aware he was dying of Alzheimer’s disease, felt “convinced that the BBC would never agree to broadcast a lecture on the subject of death and dying.”<sup>92</sup> However, in 2010 he presented a lecture on assisted dying on BBC1. The public interest in it suggests that there was a clear desire to engage with ideas about death and dying. In 2015 the BBC Radio 4 *One to One* programme broadcast a section titled ‘How to be calm about dying’ in which David Schneider spoke to palliative care consultant and author Kathryn Mannix, whose recent book is discussed in the conclusion to this thesis, about the importance of understanding and acceptance in order to experience a ‘good death,’ itself an increasingly discussed and deconstructed concept in death studies.<sup>93</sup> In late 2018 the BBC featured a range of content on death and grief including coverage of a football team for dads who have experienced the loss of a baby,<sup>94</sup> a proposal for classes on death to be included in the school timetable in Australia<sup>95</sup> and three articles about the increasing popularity of death doulas (end-of-life doulas work alongside the dying and their

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<sup>88</sup> Gitte H. Koksvik, “Let’s talk about death (over dinner). An invitation and guide to life’s most important conversation,” *Mortality* 24:4 (2019): 492, doi: [10.1080/13576275.2019.1576603](https://doi.org/10.1080/13576275.2019.1576603)

<sup>89</sup> Foltyn, “Dead famous and dead sexy,” 169.

<sup>90</sup> BBC, “Call to end ‘taboo’ of talking about death,” *BBC news*, February 26, 2018, accessed June 22, 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-43169284>

<sup>91</sup> Kathryn Mannix, “How our lives end must no longer be a taboo subject,” *The Guardian*, August 16, 2018, accessed June 22, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/aug/16/how-our-lives-end-taboo-death-supreme-court>

<sup>92</sup> Rob Wilkins, “Introduction,” in Terry Pratchett, *Shaking Hands with Death* (London: Penguin, 2015), 8.

<sup>93</sup> David Schneider, “How to be calm about dying,” *One to One*, BBC Radio 4, broadcast November 9, 2015, accessed June 22, 2020, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p037lkp0>

<sup>94</sup> BBC, “Sands United: The football team for fathers who’ve lost a baby,” *BBC news*, November 6, 2018, accessed June 22, 2020, [https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/video\\_and\\_audio/headlines/46046554/sands-united-the-football-team-for-fathers-who-ve-lost-a-baby](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/video_and_audio/headlines/46046554/sands-united-the-football-team-for-fathers-who-ve-lost-a-baby)

<sup>95</sup> Matt Pickles, “Putting death on the school timetable,” *BBC news*, July 4, 2018, accessed June 22, 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-44689506>

families in a non-medical role).<sup>96</sup> However, all positioned their content using words like ‘taboo’ and ‘weird,’ tending to reiterate in some form the commonly held view that as a society ‘we don’t talk enough about death.’

The BBC recently produced content on people’s experiences of grief, describing it as “inevitable and individual,” in a short online programme designed to be shared via social media, again positioned as a challenge to a wider climate of not talking about death.<sup>97</sup> They reported on an obituary of a young woman addicted to opioids in the US that went viral online<sup>98</sup> and reproduced part of an open letter by Nick Cave about the way he feels the continued presence of his dead son in his life.<sup>99</sup> The documentary *One More Time With Feeling* (2016) offers a moving examination of the loss experienced by the Cave family. Channel 4 has provided programming explicitly on death and loss, with Grayson Perry’s series *Rites of Passage* focusing on death in an episode following the lives of two families.<sup>100</sup> One terminally ill man and his family hold a living funeral. Another family explores personal ways to mourn the death of their son. Perry prefaces the episode by saying that death is denied in the west, comparing it to cultures with different approaches to death and dying and suggesting that secularism has led to fewer traditions through which to engage with loss. Though he does emphasise that new traditions and rituals are emerging, such as those that take place in the episode, the narrative of death denial remains evident.

The 2018 documentary *Island* follows four people dying in a hospice on the Isle of Wight, one in his 40s and the other three in their 80s.<sup>101</sup> The death of one of the participants is, with permission, shown. Yet in terms of the film’s promotion and reporting in news media the narrative of death denial dominates. The filmmaker has stated: “death is seen as a

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<sup>96</sup> Emily Ford, “Meet the ‘end-of-life doulas’ guiding people to their death,” *BBC news*, August 10, 2018, accessed June 22, 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-england-hampshire-45119913/meet-the-end-of-life-doulas-guiding-people-to-their-death>; Toby Lee-Manning, “Why I’m training to help people face up to death,” *BBC3*, September 4, 2018, accessed June 22, 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bbcthree/article/1b964900-cbc6-44d9-9f13-3112766c6c72>; BBC, “I’m a friend at the end – why I became a death doula,” *BBC news*, October 9, 2018, accessed June 22, 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-edinburgh-east-fife-45796983>

<sup>97</sup> Rob Brown and India Rakusen, “Why grief is not something you have to ‘get over’,” *BBC News*, March 3, 2018, accessed June 22, 2020, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/stories-43227108/why-grief-is-not-something-you-have-to-get-over>

<sup>98</sup> Georgia Rannard, “The life and death of Maddie Linsenmeier,” *BBC news*, October 28, 2018, accessed June 22, 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-45984843>

<sup>99</sup> BBC, “Nick Cave shares open letter on mourning his son,” *BBC News*, November 3, 2018, accessed June 22, 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-46084553>

<sup>100</sup> Grayson Perry: *Rites of Passage*, episode one “Death,” directed by Neil Crompton, August 23, 2018.

<sup>101</sup> *Island*, dir. Steven Eastwood, Hakawati, 2018, Feature Film.

shameful thing - we think we're a progressive society, but we repress and deny death."<sup>102</sup> A review of the film for the BFI similarly positions it as oppositional to a broader context of death denial, drawing on Ariès and questioning why death continues to be a visual taboo when it happens to everyone.<sup>103</sup> The reviewer asks "Who would *want* to go to the cinema to watch the human body as it winds down and eventually becomes a corpse?"<sup>104</sup> The documentary is unlikely to have a very commercially successful release, but was commissioned by a gallery in Brighton. It was produced with support from Sussex NHS trust and is being used to help medics handle end of life care, emphasising a growing concern with supporting healthcare professionals to shift practices when it comes to palliative care.<sup>105</sup>

What these examples demonstrate is that engagement with death outside of academic or literary works is not difficult to locate, but that it is consistently positioned as oppositional, going against the grain of a broader social climate of death denial, or breaking a taboo. In 1991, Walter carried out a similar task in listing a range of articles from British newspapers and other publications that positioned death as the great taboo of the time. Walter points out that "it is a strange taboo that is proclaimed by every pundit in the land" and questions "why, if death is not taboo, the constant proclamation of it as such?"<sup>106</sup> This suggests that little has changed in terms of the representation of death in Britain as taboo despite evident engagement with it. Walter points out that one of the reasons that it is possible to "debate endlessly and inconclusively whether death is or is not taboo" is that "you can choose your answer depending on where you look and in order to fit your own particular experience of bereavement."<sup>107</sup> In terms of death denial, Zimmerman and Rodin have argued that "the conclusion that contemporary western society is death-denying is simplistic if not altogether false."<sup>108</sup> Yet the situation is especially complex. Authors like Barnes and Gilbert have reiterated the notion that death is denied in the west, as they individually conceive of it, because they have personally felt it to be so, emphasising how

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<sup>102</sup> Helen Bushby, "Why I filmed a man take his last breath," *BBC News*, September 14, 2018, accessed June 22, 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-45483616>

<sup>103</sup> Sophie Monks Kaufman, "The weight of death in documentary," *BFI*, September 14, 2018, accessed June 22, 2020, <https://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/comment/unfiction/death-dying-documentary-taboo-steven-eastwood-island>

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.* Italics in original.

<sup>105</sup> See, for example, Atul Gawande, *Being Mortal: Illness Medicine and What Matters in the End* (London: Profile books, 2015).

<sup>106</sup> Walter, "Modern Death," 295.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 305.

<sup>108</sup> Zimmermann and Rodin, "The denial of death thesis," 126-127.

different experiences and understandings of the shifting and complex idea of western culture can exist simultaneously. Their experience should not be undermined or discounted. As chapter three will examine, it is in part the primacy of the self coupled with imperatives to think of the self as a narrative that have opened up spaces for engagement with death and dying in late postmodern culture by venerating personal stories. Tradii and Robert also point out that the reiteration of the death denial thesis is evident and striking in “a variety of associations and cultural events which claim to be confronting the great taboo of Western society,” such as what is commonly termed the death positive movement (a broad cultural and philosophical movement often associated with the US organisation The Order of the Good Death), the grassroots death café movement and organisations that encourage conversation about death and dying, such as Dying Matters in the UK.<sup>109</sup> There are good reasons for this. Just as academics must justify their research in terms of importance and demand, so must charities, journalists and community organisations, many of whom emphasise the death denial narrative as a way to foreground the importance of the contributions they are making to challenging it.

### **The politics of death in late postmodern culture**

The narrative of death denial, according to Tradii and Robert, also continues to be reiterated in “sociological textbooks.”<sup>110</sup> They use the example of the *Handbook of Death and Dying* (2003), widely utilised for undergraduate and postgraduate courses across a range of disciplines.<sup>111</sup> Though one chapter suggests that in the “next few decades there will be intensified interest in death and dying and an increase in the growth of the death awareness movement,”<sup>112</sup> the text largely reinforces the death denial thesis and maintains, according to Tradii and Robert, “a certain scepticism towards the idea that a new acceptance of death may have been achieved in recent years through the resurgence of discussions about death and dying.”<sup>113</sup> The text includes a chapter titled ‘Death Denial: Hiding and Camouflaging Death’ in which the author uses September 11 2001 as an example of how events might shift a culture’s death ethos or attitude to dying.<sup>114</sup> The author, Bert Hayslip, does not make

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<sup>109</sup> Tradii and Robert, “Do we deny death? II,” 384.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Clifton Bryant, ed. *Handbook of Death and Dying* (London: Sage, 2003).

<sup>112</sup> Kenneth Doka, “The Death Awareness Movement: Description, History, and Analysis,” in Clifton Bryant, ed. *Handbook of Death and Dying* (London: Sage, 2003), 55.

<sup>113</sup> Tradii and Robert, “Do we deny death? II,” 385.

<sup>114</sup> Bert Hayslip, “Death Denial: Hiding and Camouflaging Death,” in *Handbook of Death and Dying* in Clifton Bryant, ed. *Handbook of Death and Dying* (London: Sage, 2003).

explicit whether he considers September 11 2001 to have made the US more or less death-denying, but suggests that increased security in the aftermath and the attacks themselves may have made US citizens more aware of death. Gilbert is more confident in asserting that after September 11, 2001, “death itself seemed to have drilled a black hole in the American psyche, a gaping wound out of which a new awareness of mortality and even some new ways of mourning emerged.”<sup>115</sup>

Hayslip’s contribution to the writing on death denial, however, raises significant questions about the politics of death, an emerging concern in death studies and elsewhere. He writes that September 11 2001 led to the “targeting of individuals whose appearance and/or heritage cause us to be suspicious of their motives.”<sup>116</sup> His choice of language implies that the ‘us’ of the US is concomitant with whiteness, free of any physical marker of difference from an exclusive notion of what it is to be ‘American,’ and raises questions about whose deaths are deemed notable, a topic explored further in chapter three. Kami Fletcher, president of The Collective for Radical Death Studies mentioned in the introduction, has discussed how “us-versus-them” thinking has “played a significant role in European colonization, imperialism, slavery/plantation-complex, discrimination, oppression and privilege.”<sup>117</sup> The Collective emphasises the ways in which death studies has so often been disproportionately white and involved in the uncritical transmission of Eurocentric norms. With the emergence of the Collective, death studies might now see not only a shift away from the death denial thesis, but a shift toward a more critically engaged, inclusive and political death studies that acknowledges that “unarmed black people murdered by the police, Mexican immigrants dying seeking asylum in the US or the fact that a trans woman will most likely have last rites performed that are incongruent with her last wishes” should all be “central to death studies.”<sup>118</sup>

In stark contrast to Hayslip’s exclusionary use of the term ‘us,’ Judith Butler argues in an examination of the politics of death and the ‘war on terror’ that it is death that has the greatest capacity to unite and make possible an inclusive use of the pronouns ‘us’ or ‘we.’ She states that “despite our differences in location and history [...] all of us have some

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<sup>115</sup> Gilbert, *Death’s Door*, xxi.

<sup>116</sup> Hayslip, “Death Denial,” 40.

<sup>117</sup> Kami Fletcher, “Decolonising Death Studies,” August 10, 2019, accessed June 22, 2020, <https://radicaldeathstudies.com/2019/08/10/decolonizing-death-studies/>

<sup>118</sup> Kami Fletcher and Tamara Waraschinski, “The Collective for Radical Death Studies,” August 22, 2019, accessed June 22, 2020, <http://www.orderofthegooddeath.com/the-collective-for-radical-death-studies>

notion of what it is to have lost somebody,” suggesting that “loss has made a tenuous ‘we’ of us all.”<sup>119</sup> Butler’s analysis is representative of a broader concern with the ways in which death is politicised. Benjamin Noys has suggested that what we are now witnessing is, rather than the denial of death, “the absolute politicisation of death.”<sup>120</sup> For Noys, death is politicised because decisions about what constitutes life and death are professionalised and new technologies have enabled professionals to “further identify and decide on bare life.”<sup>121</sup> Noys examines legal cases that have ruled on what constitutes life to make the point that rather than the cessation of care, it is the political decision to end that care that brings life to a close. Though in many ways death has always been the explicit result of political decision-making (in war, for example), technologies that afford new medical possibilities as well as new weapons have complicated and intensified the political dimensions of death in a range of ways, as have debates around assisted dying. Ideas about the politics and technologisation of dying and the extension of life are particularly prominent in the autobiographical and televisual texts examined in chapters four and five.

Noys is highly critical of death studies as an academic formation. He deems it “more of a proposal than a reality.”<sup>122</sup> He considers work in death studies to focus too much on the cultural meanings of death, and insufficiently on how “the boundary between death and life is fixed politically.”<sup>123</sup> His own work has focused on what he deems an increasing exposure to death in the twenty-first century, arguing that we have “become exposed to death in new ways” and that this “exposure penetrates all political identity.”<sup>124</sup> Noys paints the picture of a paradoxical culture in which “death is at once feared and desired, an object of disgust and horror, but also of pleasure,” emphasising that what is not acknowledged is “the profane banality of death.”<sup>125</sup> He sees death as both “invisible and highly visible.”<sup>126</sup> The paradox of death’s simultaneous presence and absence is one that emerges time and again in recent writing on death, with a contradictory attitude toward death often positioned as a key characteristic of the contemporary *zeitgeist*.

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<sup>119</sup> Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The powers of mourning and violence* (London: Verso, 2006), 20.

<sup>120</sup> Benjamin Noys, *The Culture of Death* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2005), 64.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.* Noys, like Butler, draws explicitly on Giorgio Agamben’s conception of bare life.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

Keith Durkin suggests that a cultural climate in which 'ordinary' death is denied and violent death is everywhere can be seen most obviously in popular culture, which he argues is "fraught with thanatological content."<sup>127</sup> Michele Aaron also stresses the discrepancy between the banal reality of death for most people and the dramatic, violent deaths that tend to populate contemporary culture, in particular film. Aaron argues, as the epigraph for this chapter points out, that "death is everywhere and nowhere in contemporary Western culture."<sup>128</sup> She writes that though "vulnerability or violence propels most mainstream fictions" and "our film and television screen are steeped in death's dramatics," the "pain or smell of death, the banality of physical, or undignified decline, the dull ache of mourning, are rarely seen."<sup>129</sup> Noys and Aaron's views are reminiscent of Gorer's argument in his essay 'The Pornography of Death,' in that they emphasise a lack of representation of 'natural' death and position violent, dramatic representations of death as central to a broader culture of death denial. Aaron examines the distancing devices utilised in mainstream cinema, which she writes are "about our fear not only of death but of our implication in others' deaths."<sup>130</sup> She also stresses the politics of death and dying, emphasising the ways in which "mainstream cinema works to bestow value upon certain lives, specific sociocultural identities, in a hierarchical and partisan way."<sup>131</sup> She points out that "geography, race, class, gender, age and so on determine our proximity to death" as well as whether we "revel in the fantasies on the screen as our only, or primary, contact with mortal constraints or remain mired in the problems of malnutrition, disease, civil war or occupation."<sup>132</sup> Aaron is careful to assert the inequalities evident in both lived experiences and cinematic representations of death.

Yet Aaron identifies, alongside a range of examples from Hollywood that present what she terms the "niceties of terminality," examples of the representation of death that are resistant, embracing "graphic, embodied and mundane dying."<sup>133</sup> She examines films that "do something different [...] with death."<sup>134</sup> These resistant examples do not express the preoccupation with trauma evident in examples of the "necropolitical grammar" of

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<sup>127</sup> Keith F. Durkin, "Death, Dying, and the Dead in Popular Culture," in Clifton Bryant, ed. *Handbook of Death and Dying* (London: Sage, 2003), 47.

<sup>128</sup> Aaron, *Death and the Moving Image*, 1.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 190.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 182.

mainstream Hollywood.<sup>135</sup> Rather than reinforcing the public wisdom that death is or can be denied, they offer “moving images of death that push us to think differently in our relation to others rather than only to feel better in relation to ourselves and to our mortality.”<sup>136</sup> As such they challenge a range of dominant narratives about death and dying and offer alternative ones. Though Aaron does engage with different aspects of the death denial thesis, both because she finds evidence for their persistence and because this argument has been so central to thinking about death in the west, her work also represents a concern with different ways of approaching death that move beyond a dichotomy of denial and pornography toward focusing instead on more mundane death, on the ethics of engagement and on the politics of dying.

Vidal and Blanco, in an academic collection reflecting on death, have emphasised that alongside violent deaths in the news media and the “ostentatious celebration of brutal and essentially fictional death in popular culture,” there is a sense that “we are also haunted by the undeniable presence of a much more real and frightening death.”<sup>137</sup> Specifically, they refer to “death by cancer or heart disease or the often protracted dying process of old age, which is becoming more and more common.”<sup>138</sup> In these concerns we might find another way in which the death denial thesis might be complicated. As noted earlier in relation to Dollimore’s arguments, much work on death denial in the west has championed the idea that a shift in attitudes to death and dying alone might alleviate the challenges faced by those who suffer their losses in a climate of death denial. Zimmerman and Rodin, however, have pointed out that “changing the ‘attitude’ towards dying” would do little to alleviate the lack of resources people have in late capitalist societies to be able to be with dying loved ones in the final stages of illness or old age.<sup>139</sup> The changes required to shift the experiences of the dying and the bereaved are multiple and structural, rather than solely about attitude – something which many organisations seeking to support the dying and bereaved are acutely aware of. It is the lack of time and space and the increasing technologisation and medicalisation of dying apparent in late capitalist societies that represent some of the

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 183.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

<sup>137</sup> Ricarda Vidal and Maria-José Blanco, “Introduction,” in *The Power of Death: Contemporary Reflections on Death in Western Society*, eds. Maria-José Blanco and Ricarda Vidal (Oxford and New York: Berghahn Books, 2015), 1.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> Zimmerman and Rodin, “The denial of death thesis,” 127.



reasons why, though predominantly associated with modernity, the denial of death thesis has also been associated with postmodernity.

### **Postmodern paradoxes**

Bauman suggested that, in the midst of what he terms “liquid modernity” (a discrete conception but one associated with postmodernity) death denial is brought about by speed and productivity, consumerism and work, and the pervasiveness of distraction.<sup>140</sup> Bauman writes that there has been a “squeezing of meditation on death out of daily life pursuits” in a culture in which there is “no empty and idle moment left in which to allow thoughts to wander aimlessly.”<sup>141</sup> His articulation of the conditions of liquid modernity bears a striking resemblance to Jameson’s explanation of the cultural milieu of postmodernity, in which he argues there is no room for questions of “time, contradiction, and death” due to “relentless temporal distraction.”<sup>142</sup> Whereas expressions of the death denial thesis associated with modernity tend to centre on loss (the loss of structures through which to interpret death and organise mourning, the loss of quotidian contact with the banality of death) arguments about a postmodern denial of death often centre on an abundance (of distraction, of activity) that precipitate a loss of time and opportunity for engagement with ‘real’ death, and with the dying and bereaved. Complicating things further, one of the things that arguably distracts people from the opportunity to engage with ‘real’ death is the proliferation of representations of death and the dead in popular culture.

Noys also raises concerns about the structural factors that shape experiences of death and dying and associates these concerns explicitly with postmodernism, which he is as critical of as he is of death studies. He dismisses postmodernism as an ideology that privileges choice without acknowledging the structural factors that limit it, and as a celebratory mode in which the “politics of lifestyles could even be extended to the politics of ‘deathstyles’.”<sup>143</sup> Making an oblique reference to Ted Polhemus’s well known phrase ‘the supermarket of style,’<sup>144</sup> he states that according to the supposed mantra of postmodernism, “death would be just another product in the postmodern cultural supermarket, and we could choose our style of death from any number of historically and

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<sup>140</sup> Bauman, *Wasted Lives*, 99.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 85.

<sup>143</sup> Noys, *The Culture of Death*, 51.

<sup>144</sup> Ted Polhemus, “In the Supermarket of Style,” in *The Clubcultures Reader* eds. Steve Redhead (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998).

culturally different forms.”<sup>145</sup> To some extent, many living in the west do have more choices. In *The Revival of Death* (1994) Tony Walter recalls a conversation with an intellectual who, dealing with cancer in his own family, told him that “cancer is *the* postmodern disease,” owing to the range of options that permit patients to make choices about their treatment.<sup>146</sup> This is one of the reasons why, for Walter, postmodernity is not to be associated with death denial but instead with a revival of death.

Walter has argued that two revivals of death can be witnessed in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century west, specifically a late-modern revival and a postmodern revival. He describes the late-modern revival as a response to the denial of death associated with modernity. In late-modern revival there is an increased interest in psychological understandings of death and grief, with ‘stages’ of grief and dying identified and championed (here Walter is alluding in particular to Kübler-Ross’s influential stages).<sup>147</sup> Walter sees this revival as a “more sophisticated version” of the “control – of others and of death – through knowledge and technique” that he associates with modernity and death denial.<sup>148</sup> Postmodern revival, Walter argues, is more focused on the individual, adhering to the view that “one should not, cannot, predict or control how any individual will die or grieve.”<sup>149</sup> In postmodern revival, private experience is emphasised, expert opinion is challenged and choice becomes an important factor. Whether this emphasis on choice translates into reality is questionable. Alan Axford, a retired oncologist from Aberystwyth, argues that choices for the dying have lessened throughout his professional career.<sup>150</sup> His experience tells him that in rural mid-Wales at least, choice has reduced with the decline of community hospitals. As mentioned earlier, though many in England wish to die at home, such deaths are relatively rare. Axford shares his views in the BBC podcast *We Need to Talk About Death* (2016 -), the popularity of which combined with its showcasing of a wide range of practices and projects focused on death, dying and old age, might itself suggest an appetite for engagement with death in the current moment.

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<sup>145</sup> Noys, *The Culture of Death*, 51.

<sup>146</sup> Tony Walter, *The Revival of Death* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 41.

<sup>147</sup> Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying* (London: Tavistock, 1970).

<sup>148</sup> Walter, *The Revival of Death*, 40.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>150</sup> BBC, “Stand by me,” *We Need to Talk About Death*, released on November 30, 2016, accessed September 12, 2019, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/b083pd1p>

Walter also suggests that in a postmodern revival of death, “a new integration of the dead into everyday life” is taking place via, for example, social media memorial sites.<sup>151</sup> Others hold a similar view, including Candi Cann.<sup>152</sup> Walter has argued that “mourners express on social media their continuing bond with the dead who pop up on the screens of friends and acquaintances.”<sup>153</sup> However, Walter acknowledges that the matter is complex and suggests that death remains, in some ways, subject to denial. He points out that the remains of the ancient dead have become more sequestered through rules and regulations relating to the screening of archeological digs from public view, and that “many Britons continue to separate themselves from the family dead,” implying that attitudes to death and dead now are likely as diverse as they have ever been.<sup>154</sup> He suggests that what he calls the “pervasive dead,” visible on social media and screens as well as via rituals and memorials, might be compatible with a broader context of death denial, writing: “the dead can remain present in society (in ways that death and the dying cannot) because the emphasis [...] is placed on the dead ‘living on’ rather than being dead.”<sup>155</sup> Walter’s view echoes Noys’s argument that the place of death in contemporary culture is evidently paradoxical, whereby death is “not simply invisible or taboo” but also “bound up with new structures that expose us to death.”<sup>156</sup>

Michael Kearl specifies some of the new ways in which death and the dead have become a part of culture. He suggests that shifts often associated with postmodernity, including “extreme individualism, capitalism, and technological innovations,” have increased the “number, visibility, and influence” of the dead, or what he calls “postselves,” in day-to-day life.<sup>157</sup> Particularly in the context of the US, Kearl argues, the proliferation of memorials, musicians ‘brought back’ as holograms to perform, and rights afforded to the dead (for example, via the repatriation of human remains) all bring the dead into contemporary culture in new ways.<sup>158</sup> Similarly, Penfold-Mounce has argued that rather than being “denied, repressed or a societal taboo,” the dead “are ever-present” in the industrialised

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<sup>151</sup> Tony Walter, “The pervasive dead,” *Mortality* 24.4 (2019): 389, doi: 10.1080/13576275.2017.1415317

<sup>152</sup> Candi Cann, *Virtual afterlives: Grieving the dead in the twenty-first century* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2014).

<sup>153</sup> Walter, “The pervasive dead,” 398.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>156</sup> Noys, *The Culture of Death*, 3.

<sup>157</sup> Michael C. Kearl, “The Proliferation of Postselves in American Civic and Popular Cultures,” *Mortality* 15:1 (2010): 52, doi: 10.1080/13576270903537591, 52.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*

contexts of the contemporary west, as “openly consumed images of death and corpses in multiple entertainment formats make them a banal part of everyday life that has infiltrated mass consumption.”<sup>159</sup> She has shown that

despite continuing debates and perceptions of death denial and death as taboo, the dead as an embodiment of death have never been more visually prominent and widely consumed in contemporary mass-mediated global society. The dead have never been more active with a plethora of the dead appearing in the news media and popular culture in graphic and intimate detail.<sup>160</sup>

Many of the examples given in this section relate to the role of screen culture and new technologies in people’s lives, emphasising the ways in which the mediatization of culture has shifted debates around death denial.

### **Postmodern mediatization**

Davies has explicitly argued that “if death was ‘medicalized’ in the mid-to late twentieth century, at the turn of the new millennium it became increasingly ‘media-ized’.”<sup>161</sup> He positions death as subject to a new kind of denial alongside exposure, in which it is “safe when viewed from comfort.”<sup>162</sup> Jacobsen has similarly drawn attention to the importance of increasing mediatization in his development of Ariès’s work. The most well cited version of Ariès’s work on death denial positions four different stages of death associated with different historical periods in the west.<sup>163</sup> Jacobsen proposes a fifth stage. He terms it “spectacular death,” the product of a new “epochal mentality” which he associates with a range of “specifying epithets” including postmodernity, liquid modernity, reflexive modernity and second modernity, alluding to sociological thinkers such as Bauman and Giddens in particular.<sup>164</sup> Jacobsen argues that the phase of “spectacular death” moves against the grain of Ariès’s final stage, which positioned death as forbidden in the twentieth century.

“Spectacular death” is “a death that has for all practical intents and purposes been transformed into a spectacle.”<sup>165</sup> Jacobsen, like Davies, suggests that death is now

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<sup>159</sup> Penfold-Mounce, *Death, the Dead and Popular Culture*, 3.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>161</sup> Davies, *A Brief History of Death*, 74.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>163</sup> Ariès, *Western Attitudes Toward Death*, 85; a fuller explanation of the stages including an additional stage are offered in Phillipe Ariès, *The Hour of Death* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977).

<sup>164</sup> Jacobsen, “Spectacular Death,” 19.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

“something that we witness at a safe distance but hardly ever experience upfront.”<sup>166</sup> Drawing explicitly on the work of Guy Debord in *Society of the Spectacle* (1977), Jacobsen writes that in a society where “everything that was previously experienced directly now merely becomes a representation,” the notion of spectacular death “inaugurates an obsessive interest in appearances that simultaneously draws death near and keeps it at arm’s length.”<sup>167</sup> Jacobsen does not refute the death denial thesis or argue that it has been entirely moved on from, as he deems this new phase only “a partial re-reversal” of Ariès’s fourth stage of forbidden death.<sup>168</sup> Rather he believes this new stage “inaugurates a revival of interest in death, dying and bereavement, professionally, politically, publicly and personally, which renders problematic the notions of taboo, denial and disappearance.”<sup>169</sup> He identifies a range of paradoxes associated with death and implies a state of simultaneous denial and fascination now exists.

Alessia Ricciardi sees new technologies, again paradoxically, as responsible for mortality’s “growing, if problematic, ubiquity as a signifier” at the same time that they are responsible for its undervaluing as a concept.<sup>170</sup> She explores the spread within new technologies of the postmodern “techniques of quotation and pastiche throughout all discourses,” which she sees as facilitating the proliferation of a peculiar kind of spectrality of repetition within the structures and operations of the digital world.<sup>171</sup> As noted in chapter one, in late postmodern culture, anything can come back and there is a space for everything – under conditions of “digital recall,” as Fisher writes, “loss is itself lost.”<sup>172</sup> As such, death is built into the structure and fabric of what is defined here as late postmodern culture. Ricciardi sees in postmodernity, rather than a denial or revival of death, “the radical devaluation of the concept of mourning” and a lack of critical engagement with the past.<sup>173</sup> Yet for her the “ahistoricism of consumerist postmodernity” is also shadowed by a marginalised postmodernity.<sup>174</sup> Ricciardi focuses on how Godard (in film) and Pasolini (in film and poetry) convey a mood of bereavement and mourning about figures and events in

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<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>170</sup> Alessia Ricciardi, *The Ends of Mourning: Psychoanalysis, Literature, Film* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 3.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid.

<sup>172</sup> Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2014), 2.

<sup>173</sup> Ricciardi, *The Ends of Mourning*, 1.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid., 7.

western civilisation. Ricciardi, like Aaron, sees engagement with death, loss and mourning in contemporary culture. However, she positions it as against the grain of a broader context of death denial. Evidently, though some identify a postmodern revival of death, others see postmodernity as a set of social and cultural conditions that facilitate death denial, positioning examples of engagement with death and the dead as challenging broader conditions. Most seem to acknowledge, though, that the death denial thesis has been complicated and problematised by increasing exposure to death and the dead in the twenty-first century.

### **Postmodern commercialisation**

Chapter one argued that death is closely tied to the structures of late postmodern culture, in which the confluence of capitalism and postmodernism have led to a hospitable environment for engagement with death and the dead. This chapter has begun to examine the contradictory and complex positioning of death and the dead within late postmodern culture. Death has been positioned as both revived and denied by postmodern culture's paradoxes, its mediatisation and its high tolerance for contradiction. The commercialisation of death has also been central to its treatment in late postmodern culture. Some of the complex relationships between death, postmodernism and capitalism can be illustrated through a reading of Damien Hirst's quintessentially postmodern artwork *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*.<sup>175</sup> It consists of a deceased 13-foot tiger shark preserved in a vitrine. The artwork emerged in the 1990s, a decade in which Jones has suggested "death ruled" the British and American art scenes, though it is important to note that not all of the prominent artworks of the 1990s, or all of those of the Young British Artists in particular, were primarily concerned with death.<sup>176</sup> The focus on death that Jones identifies was partially a consequence of the impact of AIDS, with a series of notable artworks produced in response to the crisis emerging or gaining critical acclaim. This included Lucien Freud's paintings of Leigh Bowery, Mark Morrisroe's photography and Derek Jarman's *Blue* (1993), a 79 minute film consisting of a static blue screen and the filmmaker's voiceover documenting his dying of AIDS-related illness.<sup>177</sup> Jarman was losing his

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<sup>175</sup> Damien Hirst, *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*, Glass, painted steel, silicone, monofilament, shark and formaldehyde solution, 85.5 x 213.4 x 70.9 in, 1991.

<sup>176</sup> Jonathan Jones, "Death, death everywhere: the grim reaper's on the loose in galleries," *The Guardian*, November 14, 2012, accessed June 21, 2020, <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/jonathanjonesblog/2012/nov/14/death-lording-galleries-art-more-alive>

<sup>177</sup> Derek Jarman, *Blue*, 35mm film shown as video, high definition, colour and sound, duration: 79 minutes, 1993.

vision, which was often filled with blue light. However, the increasing prevalence and commodification of death in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century art markets can also be understood as a response to death having been positioned as taboo in the twentieth century. Hirst has stated that he is interested in “how we were trying to isolate the horror [of death] from our lives and remove it.”<sup>178</sup> As such Hirst’s artworks, including *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*, can be understood as directly engaged with notions of death denial and with a desire to challenge that denial. Yet it is evident that Hirst also owes the success of his art in part to the designation of death as taboo in the dominant cultural milieu of the twentieth century. It is in response to death’s designation as taboo that Hirst’s death-focused artworks have been received as controversial, edgy and cool, fuelling their commercial success.

Mohammadi-Zarghan and Afhami have pointed out that death is one of the “most dominating components of Hirst’s art.”<sup>179</sup> However, Isobel Harbison has commented that there is “something unusual” about his aesthetic of death, which she describes as “Spielberg meets Pop” and “more BOOM! than doom.”<sup>180</sup> Hirst’s explicit ambition is to challenge the “isolation” of the “horror” of death from everyday life.<sup>181</sup> Arguably, however, he has taken the horror out, made death palatable, and then sold it. Berridge has argued that “Hirst’s main legacy is his contribution to making death a fashionable subject.”<sup>182</sup> Critical responses to Hirst’s death-focused artworks echo remarkably closely a range of academic responses to the positioning of death in the contemporary west, emphasising the absence of ‘serious’ engagement with ‘real’ death and the presence of dramatic, sensationalised, or what Jacobsen has called “spectacular,” renderings of death and dying.<sup>183</sup> According to Harbison, Hirst’s deaths, visible in “the shark, the spots, the pill-filled vitrines,” are not deaths that confront “real life” but instead are “commodifications of a kind of ad-death.”<sup>184</sup> Rather than

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<sup>178</sup> Damien Hirst, “We’re Here for a Good Time, not a Long Time,” Interview with Alastair Sooke, *The Telegraph*, January 8, 2011, accessed June 21, 2020, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/art-features/8245906/Damien-Hirst-Were-here-for-a-good-time-not-a-long-time.html>

<sup>179</sup> Shahin Mohammadi-Zarghan and Reza Afhami, “Memento Mori: the influence of personality and individual differences on aesthetic appreciation of death-related artworks by Damien Hirst,” *Mortality* 24.4 (2019): 472. doi: 10.1080/13576275.2019.1567483

<sup>180</sup> Isobel Harbison, “More boom than doom,” in *Three Positions on the Art of Damien Hirst*, *Kaleidoscope*, accessed February 26, 2019, <http://kaleidoscope.media/>

<sup>181</sup> Damien Hirst, “We’re Here for a Good Time, not a Long Time,” Interview with Alastair Sooke, *The Telegraph*, January 8, 2011, accessed June 21, 2020, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/art-features/8245906/Damien-Hirst-Were-here-for-a-good-time-not-a-long-time.html>

<sup>182</sup> Berridge, *Vigor Mortis*, 250.

<sup>183</sup> Jacobsen, “Spectacular Death,” 19.

<sup>184</sup> Isobel Harbison, “More boom than doom,” in *Three Positions on the Art of Damien Hirst*, *Kaleidoscope*, accessed February 26, 2019, <http://kaleidoscope.media/>

raising or responding to questions about the place of death in the late capitalist consumerist west, a number of critics have interpreted them instead as catering to its commodified culture, in which the temporary satisfaction of constantly stimulated desires is paramount. By arranging the death of a living thing (the shark in the first iteration of *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* was killed at Hirst's behest)<sup>185</sup> and utilising the dead animal in his artwork, Hirst draws attention to death and to the body as waste, but also to the commodification of death and the natural world in the name of culture, or more cynically capital.

Hirst's artworks are also emblematic of the particularly convoluted relationship between capital and culture central to late postmodernity. As Jameson observed, the postmodern is so much the logic of late capitalism that "every position on postmodernism in culture" is "an implicitly or explicitly political stance on the nature of multinational capitalism today."<sup>186</sup> As discussed in chapter one, the temporal late to the term late capitalism conveys not a break or shift away from capitalism but an intensification of it. It represents a change that is not particularly "perceptible or dramatic" but rather "more permanent precisely because more thoroughgoing and all-pervasive."<sup>187</sup> The shift to late capitalism suggests the shift to a state in which so much has become thoroughly but subtly subsumed into the system of global capital that little can exist outside of it. Hirst's artwork, in this case a shark subsumed in formaldehyde, can be seen, as Carson Chan has suggested, not as "the perfect vessel to convey the ideas of market culture," but rather as "market culture" itself.<sup>188</sup> In it, Chan suggests, we see the "irresistible visage of the market" as well as "the bankruptcy of a system" that, having "cast itself from the subtle and sublime qualities of being human" can produce little to say about being human itself.<sup>189</sup>

Hirst has long since been criticised for producing "capitalist art" and for his position as one of the famed Young British Artists of the late twentieth century who abandoned a "socially committed avant-garde position" in favour of an "altogether more self-seeking art,

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<sup>185</sup> Carol Vogel, "Swimming With Famous Dead Sharks," *The New York Times*, October 1, 2006, accessed June 21, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/10/01/arts/design/01voge.html>

<sup>186</sup> Jameson, *Postmodernism*, xxi.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*, xxi.

<sup>188</sup> Carson Chan, "Market Culture," in *Three Positions on the Art of Damien Hirst*, *Kaleidoscope*, accessed February 26, 2019, <http://kaleidoscope.media/>

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*



subsumed into spectacular, 'postmodern' cultural consumption."<sup>190</sup> Criticisms of Hirst echo those by David Foster Wallace set out in chapter one, wherein Wallace saw the work of later postmodern novelists as too aligned with the market, no longer able to provide a critique of the culture or world around them. Hirst's decision to use sharks in his artwork is itself symbolic of the relationship between his work and financial capital. As Luke White argues, the shark is seen to represent nature as not only hostile but "as rapacious, insatiable, and unfeeling as capital accumulation itself."<sup>191</sup> In turn, as Paul Crosthwaite argues, sharks have come to be emblematic of both the "cold-blooded predatory nature of the stereotypical financier" and "a deregulated, streamlined, ruthlessly Darwinian capitalism."<sup>192</sup> In late postmodernity, when the catastrophic impact of both ecological disasters and financial collapse have emphasised the consistency with which both nature and markets disregard the human, Hirst's shark has arguably come to represent both the threat of nature and of capitalism to human life.

Hirst's shark can of course be read in a range of ways, like the shark in *Jaws* (1975). Charles points out that the threat of Spielberg's shark has been understood as symbolic of both the "monstrous Leviathan of Soviet Communism" and "the unbridled momentum of industrial capitalism," though it is also possible that it "could just be (as Spielberg himself is reputed to have suggested) that people are simply scared of being eaten alive by a massive shark."<sup>193</sup> Hirst's shark, however, is dead. It does not pose a genuine threat to human life – rather, Hirst had the shark killed.<sup>194</sup> Hirst's sharks take on another potential meaning in relation to death when considered in light of Becker's death denial thesis, in which humans have no choice but to forge "ahead in a compulsive style of drivenness," throwing themselves "into action uncritically, unthinkingly" and occupying themselves with the "frenetic, ready-made activity" of the human species to avoid apprehending their own mortality.<sup>195</sup> Hirst's motionless shark gestures at the apocryphal wisdom that sharks need to

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<sup>190</sup> Luke White, "Damien Hirst's Diamond Skull and the Capitalist Sublime," in *The Sublime Now*, eds. Luke White and Claire Pajaczkowska (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2009), 155.

<sup>191</sup> Luke White, "Damien Hirst's Shark: Nature, Capitalism and the Sublime," in Nigel Llewellyn and Christine Riding, eds. *The Art of the Sublime*, Tate Research Publications, January 2013, accessed June 21, 2020, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/the-sublime/luke-white-damien-hirsts-shark-nature-capitalism-and-the-sublime-r1136828>

<sup>192</sup> Paul Crosthwaite, "What a Waste of Money: Expenditure, the Death Drive and the Contemporary Art Market," *New Formations* 72 (2011): 81.

<sup>193</sup> Alec Charles, *Political Animals: News of the Natural World* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2016), 67.

<sup>194</sup> There has been recent interest in the number of animals that have died for Hirst's artworks. See Caroline Goldstein, "How Many Animals Have to Die For Damien Hirst's Art to Live? We Counted," *Artnet News*, April 13, 2017, accessed June 21, 2020, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/damien-whats-your-beef-916097>

<sup>195</sup> Becker, *The Denial of Death*, 23.

keep moving in order to stay alive. The stillness of the shark might be a reminder of the stillness of death, but the moments spent making it or viewing it, understood according to Becker's thesis, are merely temporary diversions from thinking about mortality.

Crosthwaite has also suggested a symbolic and theoretical connection between death, financial capital and the high monetary value of the art of the Young British Artists, suggesting that the rapid rise in the value of modern art can be tied to the Freudian notion of the death drive.<sup>196</sup> He argues that in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century global financial system, "in tension with their manifest urge toward profit and growth," there is also evidence of "a Freudian death drive" that "culminates in the mingled despair and euphoria of the crash."<sup>197</sup> Within this system, the contemporary art market functions as an apt "arena in which reserves of capital may be wantonly expended."<sup>198</sup> Hirst's artworks, Crosthwaite suggests, are purchased by financiers in their exercising of the psychic discharge that Freud outlines in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1922). Art concerned with death, decay and waste is a highly apposite choice for this "wilful dissipation," attracting the highest prices in the market precisely because of its subject matter. The wasteful "acts of prodigality" engaged in when Hirst's artworks are sold are "maximised when the object purchased itself represents, or literally embodies, waste."<sup>199</sup> Essentially, money is best wasted on waste. In an appropriately strange turn of events, the shark used in *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* had to be replaced in 2006 because it began to deteriorate. This arguably reinforces the spectacular, 'unnatural' and market dimensions of Hirst's death-focused artwork, as it was perceived to lose its value when the natural process of decomposition and decay following death did begin to occur.

The notion that there is a death drive at play in the twenty-first century global financial market and that as a result, artworks with death, waste and (managed) decay as their thematic focus attract the highest prices makes it possible to suggest once more, as in chapter one, that death is ingrained in the fabric and structures of capital in late postmodern culture. Hirst's artworks, in being critiqued for a lack of seriousness or 'real' engagement with death and dying and for too close an alignment with market capitalism, can be read as

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<sup>196</sup> Paul Crosthwaite, "Blood on the Trading Floor: Waste, Sacrifice, and death in Financial Crises," *Angelaki* 15:2 (2010), doi: [10.1080/0969725X.2010.521380](https://doi.org/10.1080/0969725X.2010.521380)

<sup>197</sup> Crosthwaite, "Blood on the Trading Floor," 8.

<sup>198</sup> Crosthwaite, "What a Waste of Money," 81.

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

emblematic of wider critiques of both representations of death and the dead in popular culture and of postmodernism. Hirst's sharks (he has utilised a number in different artworks), have aided the positioning of death as fashionable, edgy and cool in a way only possible because death had been established and marked out as taboo more broadly.<sup>200</sup> Hirst's art is emblematic of the ways in which, as Walter has argued, "in some circles, not least the quality media, death and our feelings about death are no longer taboo but the new radical chic."<sup>201</sup> In commoditising death in this way, Hirst and others have been able to profit from death having been positioned for so long, and by so many, as something which was denied and sequestered.

### **Dead cool in late postmodern culture**

There has certainly been a rise in popular and commercial interest in death and the dead in the twenty-first century. In 2004 Sarah McKenzie asked: "how did death suddenly become so 'in'?" as she considered its prevalence in film and television, news media and documentary.<sup>202</sup> Berridge has similarly argued that rather than taboo, at the turn of the century death was already the 'in' thing. She associates the cultural response to the death of Princess Diana with the 'outing' of death in Britain and argues that after Diana there was "a sense in which the British way of death" would "never again be dry-eyed and down played."<sup>203</sup> Foltyn has suggested that "this is the corpse's cultural moment," in which "fashion magazines feature striking, eroticized tableaux of 'cadavers' modeling clothing" constituting what she terms "corpse chic."<sup>204</sup> She has also argued that, in particular on television crime dramas, "some sex charged images of dead bodies move beyond the erotic into the pornographic in ways more subtle than a snuff film."<sup>205</sup> She defines this phenomenon as "corpse porn" and analyses a range of examples.<sup>206</sup> Furthermore, she points out the ways in which a wide range of entertainment, art, fashion and advertising is "moving the boundaries between socially and sexually acceptable contact between the living and the

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<sup>200</sup> See, for example, Damien Hirst, *Death Denied*, Glass, painted stainless steel, silicone, monofilament, tiger shark and formaldehyde solution, 84.9 x 2020.4 x 74.2 in, 2008.

<sup>201</sup> Walter, *The Revival of Death*, 2.

<sup>202</sup> Sarah McKenzie, "Death: The New Pornography," *Screen Education* 39 (2005): 94. 94-97.

<sup>203</sup> Berridge, *Vigor Mortis*, 104.

<sup>204</sup> Foltyn, "Dead famous and dead sexy," 155, 165.

<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*, 166.

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.*, 166-170.

dead.”<sup>207</sup> She questions, “since sex today sells everything from celebrity to food, why not use it to sell death, too?”<sup>208</sup>

This resonates with Christina Welch’s analysis of the marketing of death through erotic art, in particular the “phenomenon of erotic coffin calendar art” produced by two Italian and Polish companies.<sup>209</sup> Welch points out the established and “potent links in Western culture between *Thanatos* (mortality) and *eros* (sexual desire)” rooted in the narrative of the Biblical Fall, but states that “rarely, if ever, has erotica been used to sell death.”<sup>210</sup> She details a range of remarkable pictures of scantily clad women in the marketing calendars of coffin companies, including a woman “sitting astride an elaborately carved coffin [...] wearing black strappy heels, black bikini-style lingerie and an unbuttoned white shirt” and another who sits on a coffin with a power sander.<sup>211</sup> Welch points out that “despite their advertising to a consumer culture-driven society where sex sells, even eroticism struggles to make death widely palatable.”<sup>212</sup> The calendars she analyses provide another example of the complexity of the position of death in a culture where the commercialisation of everything has meant that death, having been positioned as denied, taboo and sequestered for so long, simultaneously comes to be painted as fashionable, edgy, cool, and even, though perhaps unsuccessfully, sexy.

Marisa Meltzer has argued that it is not merely representations of death and the dead that have become cool. More problematically, “dying well has become a defining obsession of our time.”<sup>213</sup> She claims that “death is hot right now,” citing installation art and cocktail parties in cemeteries along with opportunities to personalise, plan and make your own death “special” as evidence of death being turned into one more opportunity to offer “a reflection of who we are” to the world.<sup>214</sup> One of the examples given by Meltzer is Jae Rhim, who plans to wear a suit infused with mushroom spores after she dies, which will allow her to continue her commitment to a sustainable environment after death.<sup>215</sup> As

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<sup>207</sup> Ibid., 169.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid.

<sup>209</sup> Christina Welch, “Marketing Death Through Erotic Art,” in *Death in a Consumer Culture*, 43.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid., 49. Italics in original.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>213</sup> Marisa Meltzer, “How Death Got Cool,” *The Guardian*, January 12, 2018, accessed June 21, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/jan/12/how-death-got-cool-swedish-death-cleaning>

<sup>214</sup> Ibid.

<sup>215</sup> Jae Rhim, “My Mushroom Burial Suit,” July 2012, accessed June 21, 2020, [https://www.ted.com/talks/jae\\_rhim\\_lee](https://www.ted.com/talks/jae_rhim_lee)

chapter three argues, imperatives to produce a narrative of the self in life and a legacy that exists after death are particularly prevalent in late postmodern culture. Rim is currently feeding the mushrooms her skin, hair and nails so that when she dies, they will recognise her body and consume her. Meltzer also cites the grassroots death café movement, The Order of the Good Death and a trend in home funerals as examples of death being ‘cool.’ She writes that what is often called the death positive movement began as “a way to skirt the commercialism and uniformity of the funeral industry” but that “commercial interests” soon caught on, suggesting a parallel with critiques of postmodernism and a certain cynicism at the idea that anything can remain outside of the market.<sup>216</sup> For the cottoning on of commercial interests to the ‘coolness’ of death she cites an acceleration in literary memoirs about death (the focus of chapter four of this thesis) and the commercialisation of (yet another) Swedish concept, that of ‘*döstädning*.’ This loosely translates as ‘death cleaning’ and relates to sorting out your possessions before you die.<sup>217</sup>

Meltzer concludes that “the death industry exploits people’s fears of inadequacy.”<sup>218</sup> “You can’t just die,” she writes – “at the very least, you’ll need to invest in a house-tidying consultant, a death doula, an environmentally sound bespoke shroud, and a home funeral, to prove just how well you lived.”<sup>219</sup> The way in which people have been exploited by the death industry for financial gain has been well documented elsewhere, for example in Jessica Mitford’s acclaimed *The American Way of Death* (1963).<sup>220</sup> Mitford, according to Berridge, was “convinced that RIP meant rip-off.”<sup>221</sup> The high cost of even basic funerals has also been under scrutiny in the UK, with “funeral poverty” identified in 2019 as increasingly prevalent.<sup>222</sup> However, Meltzer’s view is less thoroughly considered than Mitford’s and is made problematic by Meltzer’s conflation of a range of different movements, concepts and products, a number of which, like death cafés and the death positive movement in general, have no evidently significant commercial interest (though you can purchase a “my corpse,

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<sup>216</sup> Marisa Meltzer, “How Death Got Cool,” *The Guardian*, January 12, 2018, accessed June 21, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/jan/12/how-death-got-cool-swedish-death-cleaning>

<sup>217</sup> The practice is documented in Margareta Magnusson, *The Gentle Art of Swedish Death Cleaning: How to Free Yourself and Your Family from a Lifetime of Clutter* (Edinburgh: Cannongate Books, 2017).

<sup>218</sup> Marisa Meltzer, “How Death Got Cool,” *The Guardian*, January 12, 2018, accessed June 21, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/jan/12/how-death-got-cool-swedish-death-cleaning>

<sup>219</sup> Ibid.

<sup>220</sup> See the revised edition, Jessica Mitford, *The American way of Death Revisited* (London: Virago, 2000).

<sup>221</sup> Berridge, *Vigor Mortis*, 117.

<sup>222</sup> Ruth Bickerton and Carlo Morelli, “funeral costs are driving grieving families into poverty – but at last, a fightback has begun,” *The Conversation*, February 5, 2019, accessed June 21, 2020, <https://theconversation.com/funeral-costs-are-driving-grieving-families-into-poverty-but-at-last-a-fightback-has-begun-110919>

my choice” t-shirt from The Order of the Good Death). What Meltzer’s article does both demonstrate and contribute to is an increasing sense that death is being positioned as ‘cool,’ palatable and indeed saleable in quite a different way to the commodified image of death that emerges in the work of Damien Hirst or in what Foltyn calls “corpse chic,” as engagement with death becomes increasingly normalised.<sup>223</sup> As traditional and emerging practices associated with death and dying have become commoditised, movements, organisations and concepts relating to death that have no significant commercial incentive have also been popularised. Most simply, as Foltyn suggests,<sup>224</sup> this might be because the world’s ageing population, which the UN states will have “implications for nearly all sectors of society,” means that both on an individual and social level death looms large.<sup>225</sup> However, chapter three considers a range of other reasons for why this might be the case.

### Death cults

Erica Buist has argued that the recent surge in interest in death has gone so far as to become cult-like in an article titled ‘It’s boom time for the death cults.’ She writes, reinforcing the narrative of death denial, that “mortality movements are surging in popularity across the death-denying West.”<sup>226</sup> Khapaeva has more persuasively argued that there is a “cult of death” presiding over the west, as “a distinctive way of engaging with death [...] crystallized in Western culture in the late 1980s and the 1990s.”<sup>227</sup> By the 2000s, she argues, death had been thoroughly “commodified” and “entered the entertainment mainstream” in a shift that meant that “death-related content had acquired such prominence on television that researchers were speaking of death as a public spectacle.”<sup>228</sup> Khapaeva cites the popularity of Halloween, dark tourism, the rise of death studies in academia and personalised funeral practices as examples of the cult of death. However, Khapaeva is not contesting the death denial thesis. Rather, she argues that in 2017 death denial remained prevalent in the US and Russia as well as in the west more broadly, “expelled from social life on both sides of the

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<sup>223</sup> Foltyn, “Dead famous and dead sexy,” 165.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid., 169.

<sup>225</sup> United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *World Population Ageing* (New York: United Nations, 2017), 2, accessed June 21, 2020,

[https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/publications/pdf/ageing/WPA2017\\_Highlights.pdf](https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/publications/pdf/ageing/WPA2017_Highlights.pdf)

<sup>226</sup> Erica Buist, “It’s Boom time for the death cults,” *Medium*, July 12, 2018, accessed June 21, 2020,

<https://medium.com/s/story/its-boom-time-for-death-cults-3e07c7a561c9>

<sup>227</sup> Dina Khapaeva, *The Celebration of Death in Contemporary Culture* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), 1.

<sup>228</sup> Ibid., 7.

Atlantic and silenced in mundane conversations.”<sup>229</sup> The cult of death exists alongside death’s denial.

Khapaeva, like so many whose work is considered in this chapter, paints a picture of attitudes toward death as paradoxical. For example, she finds it paradoxical that there has been a proliferation of death and the dead in fiction, fashion and other elements of popular culture alongside the increased life expectancy that so many in the west have been able to anticipate since the latter part of the twentieth century (though it is worth noting that the steady growth in life expectancy since records began in Britain in 1982 was recorded as stopping in 2018).<sup>230</sup> Arguably, the rising popularity in cultural engagement with death and the dead is not paradoxical when considered alongside greater longevity. After all, the longer you can expect to live, the more time you have to imagine your death. Khapaeva argues that it is a disillusionment with being human that has led to the emergence of the cult of death she positions as central to the contemporary *zeitgeist*. She argues that it has been triggered by a rejection of human exceptionalism and “a disillusionment with humanity that renders monsters attractive,” in particular connecting a rejection of human exceptionalism with French theory and the notion of ‘the death of the subject’ examined in chapter three.<sup>231</sup> This rejection of human exceptionalism is grounded in a philosophical critique of humanism that has been diluted, commodified and stripped of critical potential in popular culture, resulting in a fascination with ghosts, vampires, cannibals and serial killers in popular entertainment. The rejection of the human has led to the veneration of monsters and the undead in the popular imagination and to a “profound contempt for the human race.”<sup>232</sup> This argument is considered again in chapter five in the context of contemporary televisual narratives.

### **Ambivalence**

Penfold-Mounce offers a different perspective on the fascination with death and the dead visible in popular culture, offering up the ideas of morbidity and morbid space.<sup>233</sup> Penfold-Mounce utilises the term morbidity not in reference to disease but rather to the “public

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<sup>229</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>230</sup> Alex Therrien, “Life expectancy progress in UK ‘stops for first time’,” *BBC News*, September 25, 2018, accessed June 21, 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-45638646>

<sup>231</sup> Khapaeva, *The Celebration of Death in Contemporary Culture*, 1.

<sup>232</sup> Ibid., 182.

<sup>233</sup> Ruth Penfold-Mounce, “Corpses, popular culture and forensic science: public obsession with death,” *Mortality* 21.1 (2016): 19, doi: 10.1080/13576275.2015.1026887

fascination with the morbid, the macabre, death and corpses” evident in popular culture.<sup>234</sup> She argues that “popular culture portrayals of death, dying, corpses and the macabre are indulged,” forming morbid spaces.<sup>235</sup> These are spaces in which “cadavers and death are becoming normalised while also becoming celebrated, popularized and eroticised alongside societal ambivalence.”<sup>236</sup> The complex status of death and the dead is once again emphasised, but here as ambivalent rather than as paradoxical, acknowledging that there is probably nothing absurd about having mixed feelings about death.

Penfold-Mounce utilises the example of *Body Worlds* (an exhibition of dead human bodies that have been ‘plastinated’ to show what is under the skin) to demonstrate this societal ambivalence toward death and the dead, showing how “it remains controversial for the public to see real corpses and autopsies even under the rhetoric of science, knowledge, art and education.”<sup>237</sup> The exhibition, which Davies has also described as pinpointing “the complex duplicity over death in contemporary society,” is now permanently on show in London.<sup>238</sup> Its architect Dr Gunther Von Hagens has Parkinson’s disease and has asked his wife to plastinate his body after death so that he can become a part of the exhibition.<sup>239</sup> Von Hagens’s work has been met with a wide range of responses, many of which suggest that “gazing upon dead people outside of popular culture and the safety of the forensic gaze [...] continues to be controversial and socially unacceptable.”<sup>240</sup> Yet the exhibition also shows that the presence of corpses “titillates public fascination and commercial value in mass culture,” and as such morbid spaces can also contribute to a “normalising process” in relation to death and the dead.<sup>241</sup> What seems clear is that, as Jacobsen has argued, “our concern with and exposure to death has not decreased” in the twenty-first century.<sup>242</sup> Rather “we witness an increase in interest that in many respects is fueled by commercialized and consumerized interests.”<sup>243</sup> Understanding the positioning of death and the dead as ambivalent as opposed to more simply paradoxical allows for a more nuanced

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<sup>234</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>235</sup> Ibid.

<sup>236</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>237</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>238</sup> Davies, *A Brief History of Death*, 74.

<sup>239</sup> Rob Walker, “Wife speaks after Body Worlds founder says: slice me up and put me on show,” *The Observer*, September 30, 2018, accessed June 21, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2018/sep/30/dr-death-gunther-von-hagens-macabre-request-put-me-on-show>

<sup>240</sup> Penfold-Mounce, “Corpses, popular culture and forensic science,” 31.

<sup>241</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>242</sup> Jacobsen, “Spectacular Death,” 12.

<sup>243</sup> Ibid.



understanding of the complicated, diverse, and perhaps inherently political, ways in which they are engaged with in late postmodern culture.

## **Conclusion**

Despite some persuasive evidence to the contrary, the narrative of the west as inclined toward death denial continues to have traction. Accounts of experiencing a social and cultural climate of death denial in the aftermath of bereavement lend significant weight to the view that death has been sequestered. However, many have also positioned the current moment as one marked by complex and ambivalent engagement with death and the dead. Though much contemporary engagement with death and the dead continues to be justified in relation to a wider climate of death denial, there is no doubt that engagement exists, often positioned as against the grain, resistant and challenging. It has been argued here that the positioning of death as denied and taboo in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries has directly facilitated the commodification of death in late postmodern culture. As chapter one argued, late postmodern culture is hospitable to death and the dead as a consequence of postmodernist impulses to bring margin to centre and because under the conditions of advanced capitalism, everything is subsumed within the market. It is perhaps the positioning of death and the dead as denied and taboo that has made them especially amenable to postmodernist impulses to engage with the marginalised. As demonstrated with the example of Damien Hirst's death-focused artworks, the range of ways in which death is imbricated in the structures of late postmodern culture have also made such engagement incredibly profitable. However, not all engagement with death and the dead in late postmodern culture is for profit. It goes beyond the market, despite being inevitably implicated in it. Attention has been drawn to some of the very wide range of ways that death and the dead emerge in late postmodern culture, on social media, in popular culture, and in the engagement championed by organisations that encourage conversation about death and dying, as well as in academia. The next chapter will consider different reasons for what this thesis argues is widespread engagement with death and the dead in late postmodern culture, beginning with the particular primacy of the self.

### Chapter Three: An Account of the 'Death of the Self'

*I think I have lost 'you' only to discover that 'I' have gone missing as well.*  
Judith Butler<sup>1</sup>

Davies has written that the history of death can be understood as “a history of self-reflection,” raising such broad questions as “Who are we? Whence do we come, and whither go after death?”<sup>2</sup> This chapter focuses on the first in Davies’s list of questions. It argues that understandings of the self are highly significant to popular, critical and cultural engagement with death and the dead in late postmodern culture. The chapter emphasises that even within the both permeable and constructed boundaries of western culture understandings of the self are highly variable, competing and complex. A range of perspectives on the self from different disciplines are considered, offering an inevitably fractured and partial account of the notion of the self and ‘the death of the subject.’ The chapter begins by foregrounding the idea of the subject as both antidisciplinary and inherently political, before outlining how the subject referred to in the maxim ‘the death of the subject’ came to be established, decentred and declared dead. Stuart Hall’s analysis of the decentring of the subject is utilised to structure a discussion of the Cartesian subject’s decentring and of the cultural and historical shifts that have gradually moved discussions and conceptualisations of the self from the image of a unified whole to a more fragmented and postmodern notion of the self as process and narrative.<sup>3</sup> It is argued throughout that the self has taken on a particular primacy in late postmodern culture, in particular in relation to the notion of self as a story that we tell ourselves, and that this has important consequences for the treatment of death and the dead. The chapter concludes by positioning the conceptual and theoretical notion of the decentred subject coupled with an increasing awareness of the others with whom we occupy the world as central to the treatment of death and the dead in late postmodern culture.

#### **The antidisciplinary and political subject**

As Donald Hall outlines, all of the major critical movements in the late twentieth century west have touched upon the idea of subjectivity.<sup>4</sup> These, in turn, built on long traditions of writing in western and European philosophy, science and religion that sought to understand the self. The abundance of critical writing about the subject means it resists disciplinary classification. The notion of the subject

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<sup>1</sup> Butler, *Precarious Life*, 22.

<sup>2</sup> Davies, *A Brief History of Death*, 1.

<sup>3</sup> Stuart Hall, “The Question of Cultural Identity,” in *Modernity and its Futures*, eds. Stuart Hall, David Held and Tony McGew (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992).

<sup>4</sup> Hall, *Subjectivity*.

permeates different disciplinary boundaries and can be interpreted as always inter-, multi- and trans-disciplinary. The introduction suggested that the study of death could be understood as antidisciplinary. Here it is argued that the subject can too, because both death and the self are “constituted at the point where several different, institutionally regulated, ‘gestural’ practices converge.”<sup>5</sup> Conceptualisations of the subject within one discipline can at times fail to comprehend or acknowledge the ways in which its meanings are generated by its antidisciplinarity, its terminology informed by different texts and its conceptualisation marred by the many discourses that gesture toward it. Work in numerous disciplines and from a range of methodological approaches offer elucidating, varied, sometimes compatible and often competing ideas about how the self can be understood, as does the work of authors who might reject any attempt to consign their work to a discipline. This chapter brings some of those ideas together to examine the self as an antidisciplinary object, and as one that is central to understanding contemporary cultural and critical engagement with death and the dead.

As David Macey writes, “few terms are more ubiquitous in the contemporary human sciences than ‘the subject,’ and few more elusive.”<sup>6</sup> Postmodernists, among others, have preferred the term subject over self because, as Christopher Butler outlines, the term subject

implicitly draws attention to the ‘subject-ed’ condition of persons who are, whether they know it or not, ‘controlled’ (if you are on the left) or ‘constituted’ (if you are in the middle) by the ideologically motivated discourses of power which predominate in the society they inhabit.<sup>7</sup>

Butler emphasises here the political dimensions of the notion of the subject, identifying its adoption by those on different points on the political spectrum and signalling its rejection by those on the right, more likely to see the self as a predominantly free, unburdened agent. Though most contemporary theories of the subject accept that external social forces come to bear on the self, debates about the extent to which power operates upon the individual abound. As Eagleton (characteristically flippantly) puts it: “everybody rejects transcendental subjects, but some reject them more than others.”<sup>8</sup> These debates are closely tied to the pervasive nature/nurture dichotomy and converge around notions of agency, or a lack thereof. Despite the enduring appeal of the self as a topic of analysis across a range of disciplines, Rachel Fensham has argued that it is cultural studies, “even at its most political and deconstructive,” that “is the intellectual field that has remained most

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<sup>5</sup> Mowitt, *Text*, 215.

<sup>6</sup> Macey, *Dictionary of Critical Theory*, 368.

<sup>7</sup> Butler, *Postmodernism*, 50.

<sup>8</sup> Terry Eagleton, “Marxism and Deconstruction,” *Contemporary Literature* 22.4 (1981), 478, doi: 10.2307/1207879

concerned with theorising the subject.”<sup>9</sup> Fensham implies (through the use of the qualifier ‘even’) that the political and deconstructive dimensions of cultural studies might have made it somehow incompatible with a theorisation of the subject. As discussed in chapter one, Eagleton has positioned deconstruction in particular as politically impotent, too concerned with theory and insufficiently concerned with concrete experience. This chapter attempts to show that all of the varied understandings of the subject under discussion here are political and that much recent engagement with subjectivity and the self across disciplinary boundaries collaborates in, shares or is sympathetic to a deconstructive approach, focusing on the instability, absence and impossibility inherent in late postmodern understandings of the subject.

One could argue that ‘everything is political’ – and indeed John Silkin wrote in 1978 that after two world wars “we shall never not be political again”<sup>10</sup> – but the relationship of the subject to significant theoretical movements and to praxis, in particular to feminist, civil rights, LGBTQIA and human rights movements, make it one that has in particular since the 1960s been thoroughly political, and continues to be so because it remains central to divisions within movements. How the subject is arrived at and who counts as a subject are politically vital questions, informing the politics of death explored in chapter two. Competing perspectives about subjectivity have wide-ranging implications for people’s lived experience, as can be seen in current debates and activism relating to self-identification and reform of the Gender Recognition Act, or the Wellcome Collection’s use of the term ‘womxn’ in 2018.<sup>11</sup> Though, as Judith Butler argues, “we do not need to ground ourselves in a single [...] notion of the subject before we are able to act,” it is vital to affirm “the thinking of activists and the activism of thinkers” by refusing to put them into “distinctive categories that deny the actual complexity of the lives in question.”<sup>12</sup> This means understanding and accepting an “array of sometimes incommensurable epistemological and political beliefs and modes and means of agency.”<sup>13</sup> This chapter argues that how the subject is understood and arrived at not only has consequences for the living but consequences for the treatment of death and the dead.

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<sup>9</sup> Rachel Fensham, “Foreword,” in Mansfield, *Subjectivity*, v.

<sup>10</sup> John Silkin, *The Penguin Book of First World War Poetry* (London: Allen Lane, 1979), 11.

<sup>11</sup> Isabel Togoh, “Wellcome Collection Admits ‘Making Wrong Call’ After Replacing ‘Women’ With ‘Womxn’ In Workshop Ad,” October 20, 2018, accessed June 23, 2020, [https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/wellcome-womxn-apology\\_uk\\_5bbe0c3be4b0876edaa46229](https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/wellcome-womxn-apology_uk_5bbe0c3be4b0876edaa46229)

<sup>12</sup> Butler, *Precarious Life*, 48.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

## Genealogies of the subject

Nikolas Rose argues that what he refers to as the genealogy of subjectivity “is not a matter of the succession of epochs (tradition, modernity, detraditionalization, reflexivity).”<sup>14</sup> Instead, it is “complex, variable, material, technical, the confluence of a whole variety of different shifts and practices with no single point of origin or principle of unification.”<sup>15</sup> Rose is drawing on Foucault in his use of the term genealogy, utilising it to demonstrate an understanding of the inherently contingent nature of historical change.<sup>16</sup> Accordingly, though he does not dismiss their ideas as without value, Rose disagrees with what he perceives as the broad periodisation involved in approaches like Giddens’s and Beck’s that seek to identify social epochs (reflexive modernity and the risk society respectively) due to the “sociological reduction of subjectivity” they represent.<sup>17</sup> As discussed in the introduction, there are risks associated with suggesting such a periodisation by defining and utilising the term late postmodern culture. Late postmodern culture is not positioned here as one more epoch in a succession of epochs that forms a progressive trajectory, but rather as a partial but evaluative term for a set of social, cultural and political conditions marked by both the presence of, and engagement with, death and the dead.

A number of the postmodernist approaches that this work might be aligned with have, as Hall has argued, sought to undermine the “credibility of a neat and linear historical trajectory of progress and expansion of understanding.”<sup>18</sup> However, Hall, in his overview of subjectivity as a concept, argues that it is “quite clear that dramatically different ways of understanding the self and its relationship to the world were articulated and realized around 1500 AD.”<sup>19</sup> The understandings of the self commonly associated with the commencement of the modern era will be discussed later in this section. Throughout this chapter efforts are made to discuss subjectivity in ways that acknowledge its history and development as genealogical, recognising that the notion of the subject is complex, contingent and has no central historical or cultural linchpin. Similarly, any claims that position history as a steady ‘march of progress’ are avoided, with the chapter emphasising instead the experiences of those whose subjectivity, individuality and freedoms have been strategically

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<sup>14</sup> Nikolas Rose, *Governing the Soul: Shaping of the Private Self*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London and New York: Free Association Books, 1999), xvii.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> For a discussion of Foucault’s use of the term genealogies see Maria Tamboukou, “Writing Genealogies: an exploration of Foucault’s strategies for doing research,” *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 20.2 (1999), doi: 10.1080/0159630990200202

<sup>17</sup> Rose, *Governing the Soul*, xviii. For an overview of the concepts Rose perceives as epochalising in Giddens’s and Beck’s work, see Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (London: Sage, 1992) and Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991).

<sup>18</sup> Hall, *Subjectivity*, 16.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

denied, excluded or erased in life and in death throughout history. First, the chapter will turn to a discussion of the concept of 'the death of the subject' and to Mansfield's argument that it was only when the subject was declared dead that the theorisation of the subject itself became a cultural phenomenon.

### **'The Death of the Subject'**

Dollimore, who describes all adherents of postmodernism (implying it can be understood as one thing) as "ignorant of intellectual history," argues that the notion of 'the death of the subject,' presented by postmodernists as being "radically innovative," is merely a mutation of older ideas.<sup>20</sup> He states that "what we are living through now is not some (post-) modern collapse of Western subjectivity but another development of its enduring dynamic."<sup>21</sup> Dollimore writes that though the humanities have for decades been dominated by claims of 'the death of the subject,' "in the Western tradition the individual has always been in crisis, energized and driven forward by the same forces of mutability and death which destabilize and fragment," and as such the "so-called 'unified subject'" which is declared dead in arguments about 'the death of the subject' "is in part a retrospective projection of modern cultural theory."<sup>22</sup> Dollimore rejects the term subject altogether, preferring the term individual. However, what he perhaps fails to acknowledge is that most theorists associated with postmodernism labour the very point that the unified subject was always a construction. Rather than seeking to imply that a unified subject did once exist, they seek to emphasise the ways in which western culture has foregrounded and privileged the notion of a unified, white, male and heterosexual subject to the exclusion of others.

As Dollimore implies, the idea of 'the death of the subject' is central to both postmodernist and poststructuralist theory and has come to inform a wide range of discourses and disciplines. It is typically associated with theories developed from the continental tradition of philosophy and is heavily informed by psychoanalysis and Marxism, specifically the work of Lacan and Althusser, as well as the work of Foucault and Derrida.<sup>23</sup> The phrase 'the death of the subject' is one that acknowledges that the individual self is decentred and, in some ways, without centre. In announcing 'the death of the subject,' theorists announce in its place what Chris Weedon has described as "a subjectivity which is precarious, contradictory and in process, constantly being reconstituted in

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<sup>20</sup> Dollimore, *Death, Desire and Loss in Western Culture*, xxiii.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., xviii, 94.

<sup>23</sup> For a brief overview of 'the Death of the Subject', see Macey, *Dictionary of Critical Theory*, 368-369. For a more in-depth overview, see Heartfield, *The 'Death of the Subject' Explained*.

discourse each time we think or speak.”<sup>24</sup> This is in stark contrast to “humanist discourses” that “presuppose an essence at the heart of the individual which is unique, fixed and coherent.”<sup>25</sup> The subject referred to in the phrase as having died – a unified, coherent, rational, knowing and thinking subject – is one whose existence became established in western thinking over a long period of time and whose legacy can still be felt (though according to Shaun Nichols, who echoes Dollimore, there was already a long history of work in different philosophical traditions challenging “the idea that there is some coherent self that stays the same across time.” Nichols cites David Hume, Derek Parfitt and Buddhist philosophy).<sup>26</sup>

A number of theorists have argued that contemporary culture is haunted by ‘the death of the subject.’ Žižek opens *The Ticklish Subject* (1997) with a play on Marx, stating that “a spectre is haunting western academia...the spectre of the Cartesian subject.”<sup>27</sup> He outlines a range of academic “powers” that have sought to dismiss or supersede the Cartesian paradigm.<sup>28</sup> This includes feminist thought, which he views as seeing the Cartesian subject as “a male patriarchal formation,” and cognitive science, which he argues “endeavours to prove empirically that there is no unique sense of Self, just a pandemonium of competing forces.”<sup>29</sup> These ideas will be explored further later in this chapter. Žižek also highlights that the subject supposedly denounced from a wide range of different perspectives might not bear much resemblance to the subject put forward by Descartes, outlined briefly in the next section. This is because it is, like so many ideas, one which has been filtered through cultural texts and discourses to the extent that it now arrives as a simplified “guise” of “the self-transparent thinking subject.”<sup>30</sup> To complicate matters further, it is not only theories that find the Cartesian subject wanting as a model that have contributed to declarations of its demise. For some, it is the anthropocentric dimension of the subject that is deemed problematic. Consequently, some perspectives seek not only to deconstruct the idea of the unified human subject but to undermine its privileged position all together. The subject may have been declared dead, but debates about subjectivity are alive and kicking.

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<sup>24</sup> Chris Weedon, *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 32.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Shaun Nichols, “Shaun Nichols on the Death of the Self,” *Philosophy Bites*, April 15, 2015, accessed June 22, 2020, <http://philosophybites.com/2015/04/shaun-nichols-on-death-and-the-self.html>

<sup>27</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London, Verso, 2009), xxiii.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., xxiv.

Chapter one emphasised the ways in which late postmodern culture is saturated with both the rhetoric of the death of everything, or what Jameson calls “inverted millenarianism,” and the continued haunting of contemporary culture by those things declared dead.<sup>31</sup> Mansfield offers another example of this, stating:

when trying to see the theorization of subjectivity as a cultural phenomenon in its own right, what is interesting is [...] *the subject has had its meaning endlessly theorized and proliferated only after being declared dead*. In other words, the subject has become an absolutely intense focus of theoretical anxiety at the same time as it is said to be over [...] everywhere in our art, our entertainment, our popular psychology and journalism, the self is represented as absolutely important but somehow insubstantial, even absent. We live out our subjectivity in a critical state of living death, a kind of suspended animation, where nothing is more important or serious, if only it would actually get around to feeling real.<sup>32</sup>

Mansfield argues here that after the proclaimed death of the subject, the self has taken on an intense significance in culture, theory and people’s lives. Mansfield asserts that the individual subject permeates culture but at the same time does not feel ‘real.’ He goes on to argue that “this confusion of presence and absence” of the self and “the theorization of a subjectivity that is supposedly dead” along with “the inseparability of my feeling and someone else’s ideas captures the paradox of post-postmodern life.”<sup>33</sup> For Mansfield, the post-postmodern landscape is one where “our experience could not be more desperate, even though it remains somehow removed, involved yet exempt, our own but out of our hands, here but somewhere else at the same time.”<sup>34</sup> The spatial and temporal confusions, intimations of loss, and specifically of a loss of control, and the presence/absence dichotomy that Mansfield describes here are clearly tied to ideas about the mediatization, globalisation and technologisation of everyday life. They are the product of the economic conditions of late capitalism and relate to the idea of the neoliberal subject – a self who is manipulable, something to be worked on and developed, but that can never be fully realised.

Though ‘the death of the subject’ represents the decentring, undermining and questioning of what is often termed the Cartesian or Enlightenment subject, it does not represent the death of a subject who is understood as mouldable and ready to be fashioned, even if significant questions have been raised about the structural factors influencing an individual’s capacity to undertake that fashioning. There is a growing body of literature examining the ways in which neoliberalism as a contemporary political and economic form of (Foucauldian) governance or governmentality shapes

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<sup>31</sup> Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 1.

<sup>32</sup> Mansfield, *Subjectivity*, 178. Italics in original.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 179-180.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 180.



subjectivities. Much of it draws on the work of Rose who, when discussing the self in relation to liberalism, outlines how in contemporary western culture it has become a necessity that “each individual must render his or her life meaningful as if it were the outcome of individual choices made in furtherance of a biographical project of self-realization.”<sup>35</sup> Valerie Walkerdine has developed Rose’s arguments and suggests that neoliberal times “demand a subject who is capable of constant self-invention.”<sup>36</sup> Giddens’s influential work on the self has positioned the self as reflexive, stating that “in the post-traditional order of modernity, and against the backdrop of new forms of mediated experience, self-identity becomes a reflexively organised endeavour.”<sup>37</sup> This “reflexive project of the self” entails the “sustaining of coherent, yet continuously revised, biographical narratives” as individuals must negotiate a range of choices and systems as they live out their lives.<sup>38</sup> This idea of the self as manipulable can be traced back to the conception of the unified subject of the early modern period. Stephen Greenblatt has argued that “perhaps the simplest observation that we can make” about the changes that took place in the early modern period is “that in the sixteenth century there appears to be an increased self-consciousness about the fashioning of human identity as a manipulable, artful process.”<sup>39</sup> Understandings of the self as controllable and malleable, especially when combined with personal and social imperatives to make a narrative of one’s life, form a significant component of late postmodern culture.

## Terminology

The subject whose death is announced in the maxim ‘the death of the subject’ has been referred to by a host of names including the Cartesian subject, the sovereign individual, the Enlightenment subject, the humanist subject and the modern self, though each author uses their term with a specific intended meaning. Hall argues that the sheer amount of social and political change taking place in Western Europe and the British Isles around the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, when the subjectivity under discussion here began to emerge means that the period can be understood as overdetermined. According to Hall, there were “so many separate, as well as overlapping, forces and factors” shaping what might be termed the emergence of the modern self that “no one cause can be isolated as a simple explanation.”<sup>40</sup> The Reformation, the establishment of the printing press, the

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<sup>35</sup> Rose, *Governing the Soul*, ix.

<sup>36</sup> Valerie Walkerdine, “Reclassifying Upward Mobility: Femininity and the neo-liberal subject,” *Gender and Education* 15.3 (2003): 240, doi: 10.1080/09540250303864

<sup>37</sup> Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, 5.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-fashioning: from More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1980), 1-2.

<sup>40</sup> Hall, *Subjectivity*, 17.

beginnings of European colonialism, significant scientific developments and urbanisation were just some of the factors shaping understandings of the self. Lukács and Watt have both traced the development of the modern self and the rise of individualism specifically in relation to the novel, demonstrating the ways in which both cultural forms and individual texts develop out of broader social, economic and philosophical changes whilst simultaneously shaping and informing the societies in which they circulate.<sup>41</sup> Watt draws particular attention to Descartes and the way in which he articulated the primacy of the individual, self-reliant subject so often found in the early novel. According to Watt, Descartes contributed to “the modern assumption whereby the pursuit of truth is conceived of as a wholly individual matter, logically independent of the tradition of past thought, and indeed as more likely to be arrived at by a departure from it.”<sup>42</sup> The phrase the Cartesian subject, which is utilised in much of the literature discussing the decentring of the subject including, as cited above, Žižek’s, makes clear the importance of Descartes to the notion of a centred and unified self.

Descartes’s proposition *Cogito, ergo sum* or “I think, therefore I am,”<sup>43</sup> has been described by Tarnas as the “epochal defining statement of the modern self.”<sup>44</sup> Descartes put forward that “all else can be questioned, but not the irreducible fact of the thinker’s self-awareness.”<sup>45</sup> According to Tarnas, Descartes was thinking through, or ‘making sense’ of, the self in “an age faced with a crumbling world view.”<sup>46</sup> The collapse of institutions and traditions coupled with discoveries that undermined existing ideas and bases of understanding meant that “a sceptical relativism concerning the possibility of certain knowledge was spreading among the European intelligentsia.”<sup>47</sup> Tarnas details the shifts in thinking that led to science reigning as “the authoritative definer of the universe” which “increasingly ruled the Western world view” as philosophy too came to define itself “in relation to science.”<sup>48</sup> According to Descartes’s world view, “God’s existence was established by human reason and not vice versa” and it was human reason that had “grasped nature’s underlying logic and thereby achieved domination over its forces.”<sup>49</sup> This view placed human thinking and

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<sup>41</sup> Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel: A historico-philosophical essay on the forms of great epic literature*, trans. Anna Bostock (London: Merlin Press, 1971; Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel* (London: Pimlico, 2000).

<sup>42</sup> Watt, *The Rise of the Novel*, 13.

<sup>43</sup> René Descartes, *Discourses on Method and the Meditations*, trans. F.E. Sutcliffe (London: Penguin, 1968), 54.

<sup>44</sup> Richard Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western Mind: Understanding the Ideas that have Shaped Our Worldview* (London: Pimlico, 1996), 275.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 277.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 275.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 280.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 279 and 281.

reason as central, fallible but certain. Simplistically, religion and tradition could be understood as no longer having total precedence over the individual. According to Tarnas, from Descartes came the

prototypical declaration of the modern self, established as a fully separate, self-defining entity, for whom its own rational self-awareness was absolutely primary - doubting everything except itself, setting itself in opposition not only to traditional authorities but to the world, as subject against object, as a thinking, observing, measuring, manipulating being, fully distinct from an objective God and an external nature.<sup>50</sup>

It is this rational, self-aware and self-defining entity that is assumed to have died in the maxim 'the death of the subject.'

### Decentrings

Stuart Hall's analysis in his essay 'The Question of Cultural Identity' provides an elucidating outline of the highly contingent nature of ideas about selfhood, identity and subjectivity. He identifies the significant shifts in thinking which destabilised the unified subject of modernity. Hall explains that the view "that the modern age gave rise to a new and decisive form of *individualism*" is commonplace.<sup>51</sup> He argues that "the birth of the 'sovereign individual' between the Renaissance humanism of the sixteenth century and the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century represented a significant break with the past" and points out that "some argue that it was the engine which set the whole social system of 'modernity' in motion."<sup>52</sup> This is what Tarnas suggests, and the argument is echoed in much of the literature discussed here.<sup>53</sup> Hall is careful, however, to point out that he is not implying individuals did not exist in pre-modern times, but that individuality was lived, experienced and conceptualised differently. Though drawing broad conclusions about how people live out their individual experiences of selfhood risks over-generalisation and might erase the differences within constructed periodisations, it can offer meaningful insight into some of the shifting ways in which particular cultures and historical moments perpetuate particular understandings of the self.

Hall provides his own summary of the Cartesian or Enlightenment subject which, though they are in some ways distinct, are phrases that can generally be accepted as referring to the same phenomenon. Hall states:

The Enlightenment subject was based on a conception of the human person as a fully centred, unified individual, endowed with the capacities of reason, consciousness and action, whose 'center' consisted of an inner core which first emerged when the subject was

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 280.

<sup>51</sup> Hall, "The Question of Cultural Identity," 281. Italics in original.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 281-282.

<sup>53</sup> Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western Mind*.

born, and unfolded with it, while remaining essentially the same – continuous or ‘identical’ with itself – throughout the individual’s existence.<sup>54</sup>

The notion of an ‘inner core’ of a person has been a pervasive and enduring one. Mansfield has argued that “from the counter-cultural call to act purely according to spontaneous desire, to the pop psychological truism that you should ‘be yourself’,” the idea that somewhere “your true self remains hidden, free and available, if only you can find the right social group, language or personal style” to help you to articulate it remains rife.<sup>55</sup> This model of the self is one whose capacity for exploitation under late capitalism and the systemic reach of the political ideology of neoliberalism is evident. You do not have to look very far to find examples of marketing techniques that urge you to spend money to help you in a quest to locate, express or articulate your true self. As chapter two shows, the imperative to be yourself in life has now extended to an imperative to be yourself in death. As Mansfield has argued, “the theories of subjectivity that have dominated the last thirty years of literary and cultural studies all agree on one thing” and that is that they all “reject the idea of the subject as a completely self-contained being that develops in the world as an expression of its own unique essence.”<sup>56</sup> The theories of subjectivity being discussed here all engage with and are arguably haunted by the now undermined idea of a unified, self-aware subject, perhaps in part because it seems to remain so pervasive under capitalism. Despite the perseverance of the idea of an inner, centred self, Hall identifies five “great advances in social theory” that have been central to what he calls the final de-centring of the Cartesian subject, if only in theory.<sup>57</sup>

He positions Marxism, the work of Freud, Saussure and Foucault and the collective movement of feminism as the five advances that, together, brought about ‘the death of the subject.’ According to Macey it is specifically an Althusserian conception of Marxism that has understood Marx’s ideas as destabilising of a fixed idea of the subject.<sup>58</sup> Hall highlights how Marx’s statement “men [*sic*] make history, but only on the basis of conditions which are not of their own making” was read by some in the 1960s as one that emphasised the absence of “any notion of individual agency.”<sup>59</sup> The individual is acted upon and as such, any action taken by the individual is also shaped and produced by the social conditions they inhabit. In particular in the work of Althusser, Hall points out, Marx is understood as positioning social relations as the shaping force in historical change rather than the individual (as discussed in chapter one, this kind of thinking is why Eagleton positions

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<sup>54</sup> Hall, “The Question of Cultural Identity,” 275.

<sup>55</sup> Mansfield, *Subjectivity*, 54.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>57</sup> Hall, “The Question of Cultural Identity,” 285.

<sup>58</sup> Macey, *Dictionary of Critical Theory*, 368.

<sup>59</sup> Hall, “The Question of Cultural Identity,” 285. [*sic*] in original.

deconstruction, poststructuralism and postmodernism as politically impotent). Consequently, this also undermines the abstract notions of both the natural 'essence of man' or 'the subject' itself, because both are produced by and contingent on cultural conditions. Hall's focus here not only on Marxism but on Althusserian and, more generally, 1960s readings of Marxism implies that it is not only Marx's theories but the reception, reading and received ideas associated with Marxism that have shaped ideas of the self and the subject. The same can be argued in relation to Freud and psychoanalysis, the next decentring in Hall's list of five.

It is Freud's depiction of the unconscious that Hall considers to be the second great decentring to undermine the concept of a unified, self-aware individual. This is a complex choice given one of Hall's later decentrings is feminism. Some feminists have offered readings of Freud that emphasise the biologically deterministic elements of his theories and accordingly position these as centring, rather than decentring, the subject, as they place sexual difference at the root of the psyche.<sup>60</sup> However, later feminist readings of Freud have focused on the more deconstructive elements of his theories (understanding deconstruction here, as set out in the introduction, not as something that is done to a text, but something a text does to itself and that a deconstructionist reading seeks to uncover).<sup>61</sup> Hall includes Freud because in arguing that human action is driven by structures of the unconscious rather than by reason, his theory of the mind "plays havoc with the concept of the knowing and rational subject with a fixed and unified identity."<sup>62</sup> Freud himself viewed the 'discovery' of the unconscious as revolutionary. Freud stated that "the naïve self-love of men" had been dashed by Copernicus's revelation that the world revolved around the sun, not vice versa, and by Darwin's theory of evolution.<sup>63</sup> Finally, it had now been dashed by psychoanalysis itself, which challenged the authority of the self to determine its own experience.

The psychoanalytic depiction of the unconscious allowed Freud to state that "the ego is not even master in its own house, but must content itself with scant information of what is going on unconsciously in its mind."<sup>64</sup> Rose has argued that the "the psychoanalytic 'de-centring' of the sovereignty of the conscious ego" that Freud instigated meant that "assertions of autonomy,

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<sup>60</sup> See, for example, Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex* (London: Paladin, 1972) and Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (London: Virago, 1977).

<sup>61</sup> See for example, Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering* (Berkley: University of Chicago Press, 1978), Luce Irigaray, *The Sex Which is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke (New York, Cornell University Press, 1985) and Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," in *New French Feminisms*, eds. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivon (Brighton: Harvester, 1981), 245-264.

<sup>62</sup> Hall, "The Question of Cultural Identity," 286.

<sup>63</sup> Sigmund Freud, "Introductory lectures on psycho-analysis," *Standard Edition*, 15: 284. Italics in original.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

individuality, selfhood and self-mastery were, if not illusory, then imaginary.”<sup>65</sup> Hugh Haughton has also discussed the impact of Freud on understandings of subjectivity and highlighted how Freud’s explanation of the unconscious “affirms the fundamental ways in which the human mind in general – and not only the ‘pathological’ or ‘abnormal’ mind – is unintelligible or unknowable to itself.”<sup>66</sup> According to Mansfield, “no twentieth-century discussion of what the subject is and where it comes from has been untouched by the theories and vocabulary of Freudian psychoanalysis.”<sup>67</sup> The profound impact of Freud’s conception of the self on thinkers in the late twentieth century also led to the development of further and perhaps even more radical conceptions of the self in psychoanalysis, such as those of Lacan and Kristeva. As Macey points out, and as discussed earlier in this chapter, theories of the self that choose to adopt the term subject at their core tend to position the self or individual “as the product rather than a source of meaning,” and this line of thinking can be seen in the work of both Kristeva and Lacan.<sup>68</sup>

Kristeva’s phrase ‘*sujet en procès*’ (or subject in process) refers to a subject who is both in process and on trial, defining subjectivity as a process of challenge and change rather than a static or inherent essence.<sup>69</sup> Hall’s essay does not engage explicitly with Kristeva’s ideas about the subject but does with Lacan’s, which Kristeva develops. Lacan’s adoption of the term subject was in his earlier works, according to Macey, simply a case of utilising the standard terminology of medical and psychiatric convention – the subject under examination, for example.<sup>70</sup> It is in Lacan’s later works that the subject comes to be defined as the product of the unconscious and as something developed over time. As Hall explains, Lacan “read Freud as saying that the image of the self as ‘whole’ and unified is something which the infant only gradually, partially, and with great difficulty, *learns*.”<sup>71</sup> Lacan claims his ‘mirror stage,’ identified as typically occurring between the ages of six and eighteen months in an infant’s life, sheds light on “the formation of the *I* as we experience it in psychoanalysis.”<sup>72</sup> According to Lacan, recognising themselves in a mirror (sometimes implied to be a literal mirror and other times the mirror of language or discourse) and seeing what appears to be a unified whole is transformative as “the sight alone of the whole form of the human body gives the

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<sup>65</sup> Rose, *Governing the Soul*, xxiv.

<sup>66</sup> Hugh Haughton, “Introduction,” in Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans. David McLintock (London: Penguin, 2003), ix.

<sup>67</sup> Mansfield, *Subjectivity*, 25.

<sup>68</sup> Macey, *Dictionary of Critical Theory*, 368.

<sup>69</sup> Julia Kristeva, “The subject in process,” trans. Patrick ffrench in *The Tel Quel Reader*, eds. Patrick ffrench and Roland-François Lack (London and New York: Routledge, 1998).

<sup>70</sup> Macey, *Dictionary of Critical Theory*, 369.

<sup>71</sup> Hall, “The Question of Cultural Identity,” 287.

<sup>72</sup> Jacques Lacan, “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the *I*,” in *Écrits: a selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 1.

subject an imaginary mastery” and this “entirely structures his fantasy life.”<sup>73</sup> Donald E. Hall explains Lacan’s mirror stage as an experience that “provides an illusion of a complete and controllable being that is the ‘self,’ and also a sense of irresolvable tension given the infant’s continuing experience of its body as always fragmented and incomplete.”<sup>74</sup>

Echoing and anticipating the loss inherent in a range of the theories and cultural texts that posit the self as destabilised, decentred and unable to retrieve a (never-really-existing) unified self, Lacan’s conception of the I is one who can never achieve the illusory unification imagined in the mirror stage. Stuart Hall reads Lacan as suggesting that “we continually search for ‘identity,’ constructing biographies which knit together the different parts of ourselves into a unity” in order “to recapture” the “fantasized pleasure of fullness (plenitude)” experienced in the mirror stage.<sup>75</sup> There is no unified core to the self. Rather, it is through dialectical identifications with the other and through language that the self is constituted. Ultimately the self is formed not in the image in the mirror but, as Hall explains, in “the ‘look’ of the Other” which “opens the child’s relation with symbolic systems outside itself.”<sup>76</sup> The importance of the other to Freudian psychoanalysis and its psychoanalytic legacy is notable, and the centrality of the other to thinking about both the subject and death will be discussed at the conclusion of this chapter. Lacan’s conception of the subject is also closely allied to structuralist and poststructuralist ideas about language. Perhaps Lacan’s most well-known aphorism is that the unconscious is structured like a language.<sup>77</sup> This implies a complex process of deferral and a landscape in which coherence is reliant on the maintenance of structures of meaning. For Lacan, and for many poststructuralists, “the ‘I’ that speaks does not coincide with the ‘I’ that appears in the message it sends.”<sup>78</sup> It is this sentiment that ties Lacan to linguistics, structuralism, poststructuralism and to Hall’s third and fourth decentrings, the work of Saussure and the critical history of modernity and the self offered by Foucault.

Ferdinand de Saussure’s conclusion that the social systems of language we inhabit structure our experience undermines the sense of a unified and agentic speaking subject. In order to produce meaning through language it is necessary to position oneself within it and, as Hall writes, to “activate

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<sup>73</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Seminars of Jacques Lacan Book I: Freud’s Papers on Technique, 1953-1954*, trans. John Forrester (New York: Norton, 1991), 79.

<sup>74</sup> Hall, *Subjectivity*, 80.

<sup>75</sup> Hall, “The Question of Cultural Identity,” 287-288.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 287.

<sup>77</sup> Lacan comes back to this idea often though different translators articulate the idea differently. See Jacques Lacan, “Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious,” in *Écrits: a selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 163 for the following translation: “the unconscious is the whole structure of language.”

<sup>78</sup> Macey, *Dictionary of Critical Theory*, 369.

the vast range of meanings which are already embedded in our language and cultural systems.”<sup>79</sup> We therefore cannot be the sole authors of meaning. Derrida in particular developed these ideas, demonstrating the impossibility of fixing meaning – either in language or in terms of one’s identity – and illustrates this with his term *différance*, which signals both the difference and deferral upon which meaning is built.<sup>80</sup> The notion that language ‘speaks us’ (rather than us speaking it) has also been put forward and developed by a range of other thinkers, in particular continental philosophers, poststructuralists and postmodernists. It has been important to Judith Butler’s work on gender and the self, considered shortly. The fourth major decentring is attributed by Hall to the work of Foucault, whose identification of disciplinary regimes of power in institutions and throughout society illustrates, as Hall writes, “the paradox that, the more collective and organized is the nature of the institutions of late-modernity, the greater the isolation, surveillance and individuation of the individual subject.”<sup>81</sup> The disciplining institutions developed throughout the nineteenth century, for example work houses, schools, prisons and hospitals, brought the individual under greater state and social scrutiny and control, further challenging the idea of an agentic subject. As mentioned in chapter one, Foucault’s explanations of the ways in which the institutions of modernity were exclusionary were also central to Baudrillard’s understanding of modernity’s exclusion of the dead. There are a number of other ways that the work of these wide-ranging thinkers, their predecessors, contemporaries and successors can be seen to challenge the notion of a unified subject, some of them contiguous with one another and some suggesting little common ground.

The fifth and final decentring outlined by Hall is, rather than an individual male thinker, the “theoretical critique” and “social movement” of feminism.<sup>82</sup> Feminism is seen by Hall to belong to a category of social movements that arose in the 1960s, along with student, anti-war and civil rights movements. He viewed the historical moment they represent as reflecting “the weakening or break-up of class politics, and the mass political organizations associated with it, and their fragmentation into various and separate social movements.”<sup>83</sup> This was “the historical birth of what came to be known as identity politics – one identity per movement.”<sup>84</sup> This shift to sectional interests is associated with postmodernism and with the fragmentation of identity. However Hall notes that there is also a more direct relationship between feminism and “the conceptual de-centering of the

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<sup>79</sup> Hall, “The Question of Cultural Identity,” 288.

<sup>80</sup> For a helpful explanation of the term *différance* see Alan Bass, “Translator’s Introduction,” in Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (New York and London: Routledge, 2001), xvii-xviii.

<sup>81</sup> Hall, “The Question of Cultural Identity,” 289-290.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 290.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*



Cartesian and the sociological subject” because feminism “exposed, as a political and social question, the issue of how we are formed and produced as gendered subjects.”<sup>85</sup> The Enlightenment or Cartesian subject positioned as universal was always already male, always built in opposition to and excluding the non-normative and transgressive otherness of the female body.

In relation to feminism as Hall’s final decentring, Judith Butler’s work on gender has been highly influential. Butler argues that “there is no self” that exists prior to entering the “conflicted cultural field.”<sup>86</sup> Rather, subjectivity is a practice undertaken through repetition, and it is the repetition of (gendered) signifying practices that naturalises them and gives them “substantializing effects.”<sup>87</sup> As Butler puts it: “there is only a taking up of the tools where they lie, where the very ‘taking up’ is enabled by the tool lying there.”<sup>88</sup> It is through subversive deviance from repetition that agency can be located, rather than in a pre-existing ‘I’ who does the deviating. Butler, like many of the theorists discussed here, is concerned with how language operates as a tool or signifying practice. When using the term ‘I,’ Butler argues, “it is the grammar itself that deploys and enables this ‘I,’ even as the ‘I’ that insists itself here repeats, redeploys, and – as critics will determine – contests the philosophical grammar by which it is both enabled and restricted.”<sup>89</sup> Rather than being something adopted by an ‘I’ that pre-exists it, that was there all along, language both enables and restricts the coming into being of the ‘I’ that speaks. Butler’s position has of course been challenged by others. Where Butler can be seen to ascribe to a rather literal interpretation of the maxim ‘the death of the subject’ in contending that there is no self prior to the taking up of cultural tools, Seyla Benhabib questions how it is that Butler’s non-subject can be agentic or how acts of subversion can occur, querying: “where are the resources for that variation derived from?”<sup>90</sup> Benhabib positions the “thesis of the Death of the Subject” as “a remarkably crude version of individuation and socialization processes when compared with currently available social-scientific reflections on the subject.”<sup>91</sup> Benhabib prefers, rather than the notion of ‘the death of the subject,’ the notion of “the radical situatedness and contextualisation of the subject.”<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 199.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 198.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 199.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), 218.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 211.

Hall acknowledges that his own rendering of how the subject came to be decentred is partial, qualifying that these are only some of “the conceptual shifts by which, according to some theorists, the Enlightenment ‘subject,’ with a fixed and stable identity, was de-centred into the open, contradictory, unfinished, fragmented identities of the postmodern subject.”<sup>93</sup> He is not the only one to have traced the challenges that have been directed toward the unified subject.<sup>94</sup> Rose cites many of the same thinkers and significant social and cultural shifts as Hall, whilst also drawing attention to the importance of the treatment of the body and to scientific developments that have challenged the boundaries and continuity of the body, such as organ transplants, pacemakers and implants.<sup>95</sup> Each of the decentrings Hall and other theorists discuss adds to an understanding that there is no consolidated core to the individual. Rather, internal unconscious drives and wishes and external, normative and shaping societal forces act together to produce a conflicted and always partial subjectivity. As Catherine Belsey has put it, theories of the subject increasingly understand the self as “not a unity, not autonomous, but a process, perpetually in construction, perpetually contradictory, perpetually open to change.”<sup>96</sup> Hall emphasises that many do not accept the conceptual or intellectual implications of the work of some or all of the range of theorists, analysts, linguists and social scientists whose contributions to thought destabilised the unified subject. Yet, he argues, “few would now deny their deeply unsettling effects on late-modern ideas and, particularly, on how the subject and the issue of identity have come to be conceptualised.”<sup>97</sup> The proliferation of ideas that posit and examine the self as decentred or dead have only heightened the prevalence of the self as the object of study in intellectual disciplines, though as Nichols states, in a quotidian sense, “most people think that there is one self that they have from the beginning that they retain throughout their biological life.”<sup>98</sup>

### **The primacy of the self in late postmodern culture**

As discussed earlier in this chapter, Mansfield has argued that the self has taken on a new primacy in what he calls post-postmodern life. The self, “more than family, locality, ethnicity or nationality – has become the key way in which we now understand our lives, in Western societies at least,” as the sheer force of new knowledge has left us “chastened by our ever-apparent ignorance, and the ever-

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<sup>93</sup> Hall, “The Question of Cultural Identity,” 291.

<sup>94</sup> Nikolas Rose, *Inventing our Selves: Psychology, Power, and Personhood* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 3.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>96</sup> Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice* (London: Methuen, 1980), 132.

<sup>97</sup> Hall, “The Question of Cultural Identity,” 291.

<sup>98</sup> Nichols, “Shaun Nichols on the Death of the Self.”

renewing obsolescence of what knowledge we do have.”<sup>99</sup> In response, he posits, “we turn in on ourselves as the only reliable locus of being.”<sup>100</sup> In late postmodern culture the subject has attained a significance that it has never attained before, positioned as a project to be worked on and developed, scrutinised and questioned, explained and dissected in a range of arenas including in theory. Mansfield writes:

At the same time as the relativity of knowledge makes us nervous and solipsistic, we realize that theory, in its lust to saturate every corner of existence, from the nano- to the mega-, cannot stop itself taking our individuality as an object of analysis. We thus become both something to be explained and displayed, and the only thing that we feel sure really exists. In this way, the subject attains an absolute intensity of significance.<sup>101</sup>

Mansfield is not arguing that the self is experienced as consistent, intelligible or unified. On the contrary, he states that “subjectivity is primarily an experience, and remains permanently open to inconsistency, contradiction and unself-consciousness.”<sup>102</sup> He emphasises that “our experience of ourselves remains forever prone to surprising disjunctions that only the fierce light of ideology or theoretical dogma convinces us can be homogenized into a single consistent thing.”<sup>103</sup> Recent scientific developments that have contributed to discourses about the self have adopted a stance that is arguably sympathetic to views such as Mansfield’s of the self as divided, competing and incoherent. New scientific knowledge suggests, as psychoanalysis has since its inception, that the self is also subject to internal forces outside of our conscious control that present the world and our own consciousness to us or, perhaps to put it more properly, through us. As a focus on the self has become central to late postmodern culture, in recent years theories and language that position the self as a narrative, either one that we tell ourselves or one that our brain tells us, have also become increasingly prevalent.

### **The illusory story of you**

Metaphors, theories and discourses about the self and story, or more specifically about the self as story, have become pervasive. They are often adopted in support of a view of the self as malleable, adaptable and a reflexive project. This can be seen in the abundance of popular TED Talks, self-help books and articles that seek to help us to interpret and change the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves in the name of self-improvement and enhanced mental health.<sup>104</sup> Paul Copley, who himself

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<sup>99</sup> Mansfield, *Subjectivity*, 2.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>104</sup> For example J. Christian Jensen, “The Power of Personal Narrative,” May 7, 2005, accessed June 23, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TuCUGD3Si-M>; Alison Ledgerwood, “A Simple Trick to Improve Positive Thinking,”

asserts that “humans have a compulsion to narrate,”<sup>105</sup> has noted that by the late 1990s “narrative, apparently, was everywhere,” including in a range of research methodologies.<sup>106</sup> Cobley draws attention to the “growth in assumptions about the relation between narrative, identity and the ‘good life’.”<sup>107</sup> This is evident now in the increase in social media applications that position their offerings using the language of narrative, such as Snapchat Stories and Instagram Stories, capitalising on a desire to present one’s individual life as a narrative for others to consume.<sup>108</sup> Yet what popularised notions of the self as narrative tend to dismiss is the extent to which a range of theories of the self from different disciplines position the narrative as preceding the self, rather than the self as the producer of the narrative. This notion will be discussed in chapter four in terms of the role of autobiography in producing the narrative of a life. Here, it is considered in relation to recent popular scientific discourses about the self.

Rose and Abi-Rached have charted the quick ascent of the neuroscientific idea that the brain is at the root of our selves, drawing attention to the challenge that the seating of the self biologically in the brain poses to Cartesian dualism.<sup>109</sup> Though the idea of the self as discontinuous or rooted in the biology of the brain is not new, its articulation in relation to neuroscientific language, research and evidence is. Evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins has led the charge in questioning whether the subjective I or “the person that I feel myself to be” is in fact a “semi-illusion” and the mind merely a “collection of fundamentally independent, even warring agents.”<sup>110</sup> Bruce Hood similarly argues that the self we think ourselves to be is something we should be highly suspicious of.<sup>111</sup> In his book *The Self Illusion: Why There’s No You Inside Your Head*, the title of which is likely a play on Dawkins’s *The God Delusion* (2006), Hood argues that the self is, exactly as he suggests, an illusion. He emphasises that even though many people think of themselves as having a range of selves – a work self, a home self, a private self – these are all illusions. So is the notion of a single self that is thinking these individual selves. Rather, the ‘I’ we perceive ourselves to be is a story told to us by our

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May 2013, accessed June 23, 2020, [https://www.ted.com/talks/alison\\_ledgerwood\\_a\\_simple\\_trick\\_to\\_improve\\_positive\\_thinking](https://www.ted.com/talks/alison_ledgerwood_a_simple_trick_to_improve_positive_thinking); Colleen Georges, “Re-Scripting The Stories We Tell Ourselves,” May 13, 2016, accessed June 23, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0L4Omgo70Rk>.

<sup>105</sup> Cobley, *Narrative*, 1.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 230.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>108</sup> For an overview of the story format on social media see Donna Moritz, “The Rise of Social Media Stories: What you Need to Know,” February 4, 2018, accessed June 23, 2020, <https://sociallysorted.com.au/social-media-stories-story-format/>

<sup>109</sup> Nikolas Rose and Joelle M. Abi-Rached, *Neuro: The New Brain Sciences and the Management of the Mind* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2013).

<sup>110</sup> Richard Dawkins, *Unweaving the Rainbow* (London: Penguin, 1998), 308-9.

<sup>111</sup> Bruce Hood, *The Self Illusion: Why There’s No You Inside Your Head* (London, Constable, 2012).

brains. According to Hood, “all human experience from the immediacy of our perception to the contemplation of inner thoughts” or “the self” is a “deception.”<sup>112</sup> Hood’s conception of the self is in some ways quite compatible with the notion of a malleable project of the self that can be tailored. He argues that “we are continually developing and elaborating our self illusion.”<sup>113</sup> However, Hood implies that we are far less in control of this process than we might like to think, or than we might be led to believe by advertisements and self-improvement maxims that tell us to be the best version of ourselves.

Daniel Dennett has his own Ted Talk on the illusions of consciousness. As discussed in chapter one, Dennett deems postmodernists to be “truly evil” and responsible for the degradation of truth in the Trump era, so the contiguity between his view of consciousness and the views propounded by postmodernists is interesting.<sup>114</sup> He argues that “our tales are spun, but for the most part we don’t spin them; they spin us. Our human consciousness, and our narrative selfhood, is their product, not their source.”<sup>115</sup> Pinker offers a similar argument, stating that “the conscious mind - the self or soul - is a spin doctor, not the commander-in-chief.”<sup>116</sup> Susan Blackmore goes further with the thesis that consciousness is not only an illusion but a redundant one in evolutionary terms. She points out that though most theories of consciousness tend to assume “consciousness, or the illusions of consciousness, must benefit human genes,” this might not be the case.<sup>117</sup> Rather, she argues, it is memes, not genes, that benefit. In order

to survive and reproduce memes need first to find homes in human brains and then find ways to get passed on. A meme that becomes ‘my’ idea, preference, need, favourite joke or special song has an evolutionary advantage over one that does not. Memes that make up the stories I tell about myself or the opinions I express have an advantage.<sup>118</sup>

So even if it is “not the continuous, unified and powerful subject of experience it models itself as being,” a “self with strong opinions, lots of ideas and a need for status and power makes an effective meme spreader.”<sup>119</sup> From this perspective the illusion of the self is instrumental, but not to us. The selves we believe ourselves to be are merely a requisite function for the existence of something else,

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid., ix.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., xiii.

<sup>114</sup> Daniel Dennett, “I begrudge every hour that I have to spend worrying about politics,” interview with Carole Cadwalladr, *The Observer*, February 12, 2017, accessed June 23, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2017/feb/12/daniel-dennett-politics-bacteria-bach-back-dawkins-trump-interview>. For Dennett’s *TedTalk* on consciousness, see Daniel Dennett, “The Illusion of consciousness,” February, 2003, accessed June 23, 2020, [https://www.ted.com/talks/dan\\_dennett\\_on\\_our\\_consciousness?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/dan_dennett_on_our_consciousness?language=en)

<sup>115</sup> Daniel Dennett, *Consciousness Explained* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co, 1991), 418.

<sup>116</sup> Steven Pinker, *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature* (London: Penguin, 2003), 43.

<sup>117</sup> Susan Blackmore, “Delusions of Consciousness,” *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 23 (2016): 63.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

much like the story told in the 1999 film *The Matrix*, but with even less agency (in *The Matrix* it was people who created the machines and could fight to be freed from an illusion; for Blackmore, people are the illusion).<sup>120</sup>

Blackmore's notion of the self is provocative, suggesting that consciousness and the illusion of the individual self are merely mechanisms for the spread of cultural memes. She also raises the thought-provoking question of why, if consciousness is simply an illusion and a story that the brain tells itself, we might find ourselves telling such unhappy stories. After all, she points out, the self that we produce is a

self who craves love, friendship, status, possessions and power. This is the self who gets disappointed, hurt, lonely, angry and resentful. This is the self who wants happiness but when happy fears losing it. This is the self who makes constant comparisons with others and fears other peoples' judgements. It is strange that an illusion can entail so much suffering.<sup>121</sup>

Dawkins, Hood, Blackmore and Pinker (who, despite their grouping together here, have distinct and differing views) all suggest that the self might be the ultimate story that we tell ourselves about ourselves, without being consciously aware of our doing so. This is a profoundly disempowering perspective. As discussed earlier in this chapter and in chapter one, postmodernist views of the self as socially constituted by outside forces have also been positioned as disempowering. Interestingly, for Christopher Butler it is narrative that is the missing ingredient in such postmodernist theories. According to Butler an understanding of the ways in which we curate a narrative of self is what can rescue the subject from being a mere rag doll in the anonymous hands of ideology, discourse and power. Butler underlines what he sees as the importance of the conscious self in maintaining "an original, often idiosyncratic *narrative of him or herself*," which he argues is "the key to creativity in the individual."<sup>122</sup> Though we are shaped by the world around us, we also have a significant role to play in producing what we experience as our own selfhood as we act out the role of both "author and character at once."<sup>123</sup> Butler's view is similar to that of Benhabib, who writes:

The Enlightenment conception of the disembodied cogito no less than the empiricist illusion of a substance-like self cannot do justice to those contingent processes of socialization through which an infant becomes a person, acquires language and reason, develops a sense of justice and autonomy, and becomes capable of projecting a narrative into the world of which she is not only the author but actor as well.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> *The Matrix*, dir. The Wachowskis, Warner Brothers Pictures, 1999, Feature Film.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Butler, *Postmodernism*, 58. Italics in original.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Benhabib, *Situating the Self*, 5.

Butler and Benhabib's positions are complicated by the ideas offered up by Dawkins, Hood, Blackmore and Pinker, whose arguments position the very self they consider both author of and character/actor in their own story as an illusion, leading to the giddy notion of the self as a story telling a story about the self.

### Stories to 'make sense'

If the self is understood as an illusion, then it is perhaps an illusion that cannot be dispelled. Ihab Hassan acknowledges that the self "is now in dire difficulty, declared a 'fiction' by a variety of theories."<sup>125</sup> However, he goes on to question these declarations, asking: "a fiction? Perhaps an effective fiction, more durable than all the theories that proclaim it so."<sup>126</sup> As discussed throughout this chapter, the self is arguably more significant than ever. A range of social, philosophical, psychological and scientific theories have now sought to position the importance of narrative to the self, either as mechanism for curating the project of the self or as the root of the consciousness we perceive as a self. Rose draws attention to the ways in which these ideas have themselves come to shape experiences of selfhood. According to Rose there has been a proliferation in recent years of theories that suggest that "human beings actually live out their lives as 'narratives,' that we make use of the stories of the self that our culture makes available to us to plan our lives, to account for events and give them significance, to accord ourselves an identity."<sup>127</sup> From this perspective, as theories and ideas about the self as story percolate into popular culture and dominant discourses, they come to form a part of how we understand ourselves. In his later book *Inventing Our Selves: Psychology, Power, and Personhood* (1998) Rose himself adopts the language of invention. However, he emphasises that "to speak of the invention of the self is not to suggest that we are, in some way, the victims of a collective fiction or delusion. That which is invented is not an illusion; it constitutes our truth."<sup>128</sup>

Sinfield has similarly argued that we utilise stories "to make sense of ourselves" and that the stories we use can be found all around us.<sup>129</sup> He writes:

In the media, they are not just in the articles and programs labeled 'fiction' and 'drama', but in those on current affairs, sport, party politics, science, religion, the arts, and those specified as education and for children. They are in the advertisements. At work [...] in our intimate relations there are stories telling us who we are as individuals, who other

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<sup>125</sup> Ihab Hassan, "Quest for the Subject: The Self in Literature," *Contemporary Literature* 29.3 (1988): 420, doi: [10.1080/713685998](https://doi.org/10.1080/713685998)

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> Rose, *Governing the Soul*, xviii.

<sup>128</sup> Rose, *Inventing Our Selves*, 3.

<sup>129</sup> Sinfield, *Literature, Politics and Culture*, 27.

individuals are and how we relate to them. The conventional division, which I have followed in this paragraph, between the media, work and personal life, is itself one of the most powerful stories. I am not quite sure that 'story' is the right term – it sounds rather informal, inconsequential; perhaps 'narrative' would be better, but I don't want its connotations of strategic organization.<sup>130</sup>

Sinfield does not engage with the notion that we are ourselves stories. Rather, he positions the subject as informed and made up by the cultural stories that circulate around us and which we participate in. His reluctance to attribute the term narrative for fear of connotations of strategy and organisation make clear that he views these stories as haphazard and disparate yet powerful. He also implies that we engage in the production of these stories – after all it is subjects who finance, make, write and share what we encounter in the media, engage in relationships with others and reinforce divisions between family, life and work through our daily practices. The way Sinfield describes stories here situates them as central to human experience, identifiable in all areas of our lives, structuring, if not strategically, our experiences and offering us tools through which to make sense of ourselves. Perhaps it is only logical that it is through stories that we come to make meaning if we are *a priori* stories that we tell ourselves before we can experience meaning. Jameson has also described story-telling as "the supreme function of the human mind."<sup>131</sup> However, it is likely he intended this in a very different way to how we might understand it if we consider views on consciousness such as those of Dawkins, Hood, Blackmore and Pinker.

George Steiner also emphasises the vitality of stories to human life, having written that it is the ability to imagine and reimagine the past and future, both as they are and as how we might like them to be, that makes life "worth experiencing."<sup>132</sup> In this sense, regardless of whether or not it is the brain's capacity to tell stories that gives us consciousness or not, it is our consciousness's capacity to imagine and tell stories that gives hope:

It is because we can tell stories, fictive or mathematical-cosmological, about a universe a billion years hence; it is because we can [...] conceptualise the Monday morning after our cremation; it is because 'if'-sentences ('If I won the lottery', 'If Schubert had lived to a ripe age', 'If a vaccine is developed against AIDS') can, spoken at will, deny, reconstruct, alter past, present and future, mapping *otherwise* the determinants of pragmatic reality, that existence continues to be worth experiencing. Hope is grammar.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> Frederic Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 110.

<sup>132</sup> George Steiner, *Errata: An Examined Life* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997), 95.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid. Italics in original.



Joan Didion shares the view that stories are vital but is more cautious and cynical than Steiner. She writes:

We tell ourselves stories in order to live...We look for the sermon in the suicide, for the social or moral lesson in the murder of five. We interpret what we see, select the most workable of the multiple choices. We live entirely, especially if we are writers, by the imposition of a narrative line upon disparate images, by the 'ideas' with which we have learned to freeze the shifting phantasmagoria which is our actual experience.<sup>134</sup>

It is notable that both Steiner and Didion utilise examples that centre on death and loss: the day after our cremation, had Schubert lived longer, were there a cure for AIDS, were there consolation in a suicide or meaning in murder. Steiner does so to position stories as a source of hope, and Didion as a way of emphasising how we utilise stories in the face of incomprehensible loss. Whereas Sinfield argues that we utilise stories to make sense of ourselves, Steiner and Didion emphasise the ways in which we utilise stories to make sense of death. This thesis argues that one of the ways that engagement with death has become increasingly a part of day-to-day life in late postmodern culture is through the sharing of individual stories and narratives of loss. This is done via news and social media, focused around events such as Baby Loss Awareness Week and, as the next chapter will demonstrate, in autobiographical narratives about death and the dead. Opportunities to share stories are also offered by charities that focus on creative responses to grief such as the Good Grief project, as well as through a dearth of autobiographical self-help books such as Laurie Kilmartin's *Dead People Suck: A Guide for Survivors of the Newly Departed* (2018). The emphasis on the self as narrative in late postmodern culture coupled with structures that allow for the dissemination and commercialisation of these narratives has opened up new opportunities for engagement with death. However, the emphasis on the self has also had other consequences, particularly in relation to ideas about the self after death.

### **Ending and extending the story of you**

Increasingly, narratives and stories are ways through which people engage with death and the dead in late postmodern culture. This relates both to thinking about death and the loss of another, but also to thinking about one's own death. According to Niko Kolodny, life, like a story, "depends not only for its value, but also for its very shape and definition, on the fact that it will come to an end."<sup>135</sup> As Davies has argued, an understanding of death as the conclusion to life has been adopted effectively by the hospice movement. He writes that "in and through the hospice movement we witness the positive value placed upon dying as a kind of conclusion to life. It is affirmative of death

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<sup>134</sup> Joan Didion, *The White Album* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009), 11.

<sup>135</sup> Niko Kolodny, "Introduction," in Samuel Scheffler, *Death and the Afterlife* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 4.

in terms of the individual's life story and, as far as possible, its completion, resolution and consummation."<sup>136</sup> Understanding death as the conclusion of the story of life in this way calls to mind those narratives typified by a three-act structure of beginning, middle and end, rather than postmodernist stories which tend to be associated with the subversion of such a structure. As chapters four, focused on autobiography, and five, focused on televisual narratives, discuss, ideas of a coherent structure, linear narrative and clear finality are all complicated and undermined in the examples presented there. As ideas about the self as fragmented and inconsistent have become more dominant, narratives about the self have also come to reflect these shifts.

Writing about history and responsibility, Derrida argues that death is central to who 'you' are. He defines death as that which confers to a person their irreplaceability. Because death is "very much that which nobody else can undergo or confront" then it is "only on the basis of it that one can speak of a responsible subject, of the soul as conscience of self, of myself, etc."<sup>137</sup> Thomas Nagel has also argued that death puts the subject and subjective experience at the fore, and as such individual narratives perhaps offer pertinent opportunities for 'making sense' of death. Because "your relation to your own death is unique," it is when thinking about death that "the subjective standpoint holds a dominant position."<sup>138</sup> Nagel is an atheist, and understands death as what Amia Srinivasan calls "the nullification of the self as experiencing subject," with the implication being that there is no experience after death.<sup>139</sup> Samuel Scheffler also considers the issue of death and the self from both a philosophical and secular perspective, stating:

Although I have had the experience before of losing things that matter to me or of having good things end, it is I who have had those experiences. The losses and ending, however painful, have been experienced against the background of my own (perceived) persistence. But I take death to mean that the very I that has had those experiences is what is now going to end. The egocentric subject - which is what has provided the fixed background for all my previous endings - is itself to end.<sup>140</sup>

Secular perspectives such as these can be understood to suggest that it is in part the (supposed) absence of belief in an afterlife that might be responsible for the primacy of the self in late postmodern culture, as the living self is positioned as more important if the living self is also positioned as all there is. Yet as Field has demonstrated, in 2011 the majority of Britons were

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<sup>136</sup> Davies, *A Brief History of Death*, 73.

<sup>137</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1996) 41, 51.

<sup>138</sup> Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 224.

<sup>139</sup> Amia Srinivasan, "After the Meteor Strike," Review of Death and the Afterlife by Samuel Scheffler in *The London Review of Books* 36.8, September 25, 2014: 13, accessed June 23, 2020, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v36/n18/amia-srinivasan/after-the-meteor-strike>

<sup>140</sup> Scheffler, *Death and The Afterlife*, 86.

reported to have believed in an afterlife of some form.<sup>141</sup> Walter has examined how a current popular belief in angels, for example, is one revealing way in which mourners express a belief in an afterlife.<sup>142</sup> A wide variety of ideas about the extension of selfhood beyond life can also be understood to emphasise the primacy of the individual self. For example, Walter has more broadly argued that “individualism’s requirement that I live my own way is increasingly being extended to a requirement that I die and mourn my own way,” emphasising some of the practices discussed in chapter two that allow individuals to try to make their own deaths and legacies reflect their own uniqueness.<sup>143</sup> Kears, also discussed in chapter two, suggests that there has been a proliferation of ‘postselves’ in US civic and popular culture as a consequence, in part, of individualisation and secularisation.<sup>144</sup> However, as the final section of this chapter will examine, there are perhaps other reasons worth considering in seeking to explain the current preponderance of interest in death and the dead. The rapid rise in the world population since the latter part of the twentieth century can also be positioned as having precipitated an interest in asserting the authority of the dead, whilst also having shaped current thinking about the self.

## Others

In recent years a number of theorists have addressed the potential implications of what Chris Rojek calls “statistical apparitions” for thinking about the self.<sup>145</sup> Rojek is referring to the “multitudes of people, who we have never met, do not know and, in all probability, will *never* know” but are aware of predominantly via global media.<sup>146</sup> As his name for them implies, Rojek argues that the apparitions we encounter on screens and in statistics are often experienced as hollow or empty, failing to feel real. Jameson similarly suggests that our own sense of self and our capacity for empathy are undermined by the proliferation of others around us, arguing that the “enlargement of the peopled universe” is having “radical cultural effects.”<sup>147</sup> According to Jameson

the more other people we recognize, even within the mind, the more peculiarly precarious becomes the status of our own hitherto unique and ‘incomparable’ consciousness or ‘self’. That does not change, of course, nor are we magically endowed with any greater sympathy

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<sup>141</sup> Clive Field, “Hereafter Report,” *British Religion in Numbers*, January 28, 2011, accessed June 3, 2020, <http://www.brin.ac.uk/hereafter-report/>

<sup>142</sup> Tony Walter, “The Dead Who Become Angels: Bereavement and Vernacular Religion,” *OMEGA Journal of Death and Dying* 73:1 (2015): 4, doi: 10.1177/0030222815575697

<sup>143</sup> Walter, *The Revival of Death*, 2.

<sup>144</sup> Kears, “The Proliferation of Postselves,” 52.

<sup>145</sup> Chris Rojek, *Presumed Intimacy: Parasocial Interaction in Media, Society and Celebrity Culture* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016), 5.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, 1. Italics in original.

<sup>147</sup> Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 359.

(in the immemorial philosophical sense) with those increasingly numerous others, with whom, in fact, we can less and less individually sympathise.<sup>148</sup>

The assertion by Jameson that more awareness of pain and suffering means less capacity to feel sympathy is summed up pithily in the following African proverb: “If you live next to the cemetery, you cannot cry for everyone.”<sup>149</sup> If loss is everywhere, it is impossible to feel each and every loss as keenly as the next. News reports of genocides, natural disasters and human made catastrophes all number the dead, missing or those at risk, and with new catastrophes and losses of different scales reported each day, painful, phantasmagorical images of death and the dead have become a staple of late postmodern culture. The assertion that more awareness of loss and suffering means less empathy is inherently generalising and deterministic, implying that affect is a process of one directional and monolithic transmission. However, few would contest that global media has provided a new level of day-to-day awareness, for many if not all, of the billions of other people with whom each of us inhabits the planet.

Jameson associates an awareness with the multitudes of other people in the world specifically with television but also, more profoundly (and problematically), with the global politics of the twentieth century, which he argues revealed “not so much death and human finitude as rather the multiplicity of other people.”<sup>150</sup> He challenges the established view that modern warfare practices were the root of twentieth century existentialism. Instead he positions at existentialism’s roots the demographic shifts associated with decolonisation “that suddenly released an explosion of otherness unparalleled in human history,” arguing that “it is the proliferation of all these innumerable others that renders vain and inconsequential my own experience.”<sup>151</sup> Jameson emphasises the consequences of being made “to imagine, mentally to encompass in advance, those numerical multitudes that, ignored, might otherwise ontologically overwhelm you” as “too many people begin to cancel my own existence.”<sup>152</sup> He adopts simile and metaphor to call on the authority of the western canon and reflect the depth with which economic and capitalist discourses have penetrated thinking about the self, writing that “my personal life – the unique form of private property remaining to me – grows pale and dim like the Homeric ghosts, or like a piece of real estate whose value has been driven down to a worthless handful of crumpled bills.”<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 358.

<sup>149</sup> Kemi Telford, Instagram post, September 29, 2018, accessed June 23, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BoTMn3KhJEu/?hl=en&taken-by=kemitelford>

<sup>150</sup> Jameson, “The End of Temporality,” 6.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid., 709-710.

<sup>152</sup> Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 362.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid., 363.

Jameson's rhetoric implies an anxiety about the devaluing of the self that assumes everyone's selfhood has been understood as having a value at some stage. However, as Judith Butler has argued in her collection of essays in the aftermath of the invasion of Iraq, some lives have always been deemed so valuable as to mobilise the powerful to war whilst others have failed to qualify as grievable.<sup>154</sup> Rather than acknowledging histories wherein an economic value has been placed on people's lives, or drawing attention to the complex political and social contexts of the numerical multitudes he refers to (likely to be from a different continent with a very different economic and cultural background to Jameson himself), he paints the picture of a formerly robust ego undermined and devalued by the presence of too many other egos. Contrastingly, where Jameson compares a human life under the weight of the knowledge of so many unknowable others to currency notes, Butler considers the importance of other kinds of notes. She positions obituary notes as "the means by which a life becomes note-worthy" or "worth a note" and draws attention to the absence of obituaries for swathes of the dead we are made aware of via media reporting but whose lives have not been deemed to warrant noting or narrativising.<sup>155</sup> How such significant numbers of the dead might be noted and accounted for poses a perhaps insurmountable challenge.

Jameson's analysis gives credence to the assumption that there are now more people alive than have ever been dead. In 1991 he stated:

It would seem, according to some reports, that the quantities of human beings now alive today [...] is rapidly approaching the total number of hominids who have already lived and died on the planet since the beginning of the species [...] now that we, the living, have the preponderance, the authority of the dead – hitherto based on sheer numbers – diminishes at a dizzying rate (along with all the other forms of authority and legitimacy) [...] If we outnumber the dead, in other words, we win; we are more successful merely by virtue of the fact of having been born.<sup>156</sup>

Jameson is not the only one to hold this view. A similar sentiment is visible in the work of Anderson, who writes:

The sudden horizontal enlargement of the system, with the integration for the first time of virtually the whole planet into the world market, means the entry of new peoples onto the global stage, whose human weight is rapidly increasing. The authority of the past, constantly dwindling under pressures of economic innovation in the First World, sinks in another way with demographic explosion in the Third World, as fresh generations of the living come to outnumber all the legions of the dead.<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> Butler, *Precarious Life*, 32.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>156</sup> Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 360-361.

<sup>157</sup> Anderson, *The Origins of Postmodernity*, 63.

According to other reports Jameson and Anderson are incorrect in their understanding that those living have come to outnumber the dead. In 2012, figures suggested that there were about 15 dead people to every living person and that the world population would need to reach about 100 to 150 billion for the living to take the lead.<sup>158</sup> However their concern with the notion is indicative of popular anxieties about the growing world population. Both authors propound the view that too many living people undermine the authority of the dead and the past. Anxieties about there being 'too many' people might account in part for the primacy of the self in late postmodern culture, as in the face of so many others the need to assert a sense of individual self takes on a new relevance. Concern about the undermining of the authority of the dead and of the past might also go some way to accounting for what this thesis argues is an evident cultural interest in engaging with the past, giving a voice to the dead, and acknowledging the responsibility of the living toward them.

For Anderson, it is capitalism and the reach of the global market across the world that has led to the ushering of masses of others onto the global stage. Both Jameson and Anderson suggest an undercurrent of anxiety about the de-historicising effects of population growth being particularly undermining of western dominance, visible in the former's Homeric simile and in the latter's emphasis on population growth in what he terms the 'Third World.' Similarly, both position the living as the winners in an imagined global battle between the living and the dead merely due to their innumerable number. This is in stark contrast to the current preponderance of zombie apocalypse narratives that position the living as threatened by the innumerable dead. According to Luckhurst, it is wide-spread concern about population growth that is responsible for the popularity of survival horror as a genre, visible in film, television, print, online media and beyond. Narratives about a few individuals striving to survive negotiate "the pressing problem of the modern world's sheer number of people, the population explosion, bodies crammed into super-cities and suburban sprawls, demanding satiation beyond any plan for sustainable living."<sup>159</sup> As Luckhurst puts it, "survival horror is the crisis of the last representatives of rugged Western individualism trying to wrest themselves from the unregarded life of the anonymized mass."<sup>160</sup> The individual subject is under threat, undermined and fighting for survival whilst, *en masse*, other (dead but animate) people represent the threat.

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<sup>158</sup> Wesley Stephenson, "Do the dead outnumber the living?," February 4, 2012, accessed June 23, 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-16870579>

<sup>159</sup> Luckhurst, *Zombies*, 11.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

The evident ethical problem with positioning people *en masse* as a threat to the individual is that it dehumanises the individual others that constitute the mass. Achille Mbembe provides a stark reminder that experience is not neutrally determined but shaped through a “form of governmentality that consists in the management of the multitudes.”<sup>161</sup> Mbembe puts forward the terms necropolitics and necropower to “account for the various ways in which, in our contemporary world, weapons are deployed in the interest of maximum destruction of persons and the creation of *death-worlds*,” which he defines as “new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead*.”<sup>162</sup> Though survival horror and zombie films in particular present innumerable others as dehumanised and a threat, Mbembe uses the terms ‘death-worlds’ and ‘living dead’ to articulate the fate of millions of people denied their human rights whose experiences are far from fictional. Yet arguably, rather than merely reflecting fears and anxieties about population growth, it is the capacity for masses of zombies to negotiate questions about selfhood and agency at an individual level that have made them so potent an image in late postmodern culture.

Reed and Penfold-Mounce, whose work on popular television as social-science fiction was mentioned in the introduction, have argued that the television series *The Walking Dead* raises “fundamental questions about agency” and challenges “our assumptions about humanness and the place of biology.”<sup>163</sup> Televisual narratives offer a way of exploring, negotiating and ‘making sense’ of the world and individual experience in ways that Reed and Penfold-Mounce argue can be understood as social scientific. Luckhurst has similarly argued that rather than understanding fictional depictions of the zombie apocalypse as “an allegory of neo-liberal globalization” they might be better understood as a “peculiar new form of social realism.”<sup>164</sup> Perhaps, he writes, “the zombie is less *allegoresis* – a writing otherwise – than a literalization of the capitalist logic of the expropriation of dead labour from living bodies.”<sup>165</sup> Understood in this way, “the zombie hordes are the living-dead proletariat, dying as guest workers on construction sites or in heavy industry or garment factories around the world in their hundreds of thousands.”<sup>166</sup> Contrary to the view that a heightened awareness of suffering across the world leads to less empathy, this perspective suggests that popular representations of the living battling the dead negotiate and give rise to questions

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<sup>161</sup> Achille Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” trans Libby Meintjes, *Public Culture* 15:1 (2003): 34, doi: 10.1215/08992363-15-1-11

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, 40. Italics in original.

<sup>163</sup> Reed and Penfold-Mounce, “Zombies and the Sociological Imagination,” 126.

<sup>164</sup> Luckhurst, *Zombies*, 183.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*

about selfhood and agency and provide politicised and literal translations of an increased awareness of the conditions in which many of the world's poorest people live.

What authors who grapple with the arguably de-historicising effects of population growth, fictional representations of zombie masses and the concept of statistical apparitions all explore is a significant concern with the impingement of the other on the self. Like the self, and intricately tied to discussions of subjectivity, the other (or Other) is a recurring and complex idea and one adopted frequently in the humanities and social sciences, in particular in postcolonial theory, and in a range of ways in psychoanalysis. Macey writes that "the meaning of the term varies considerably" but refers, at its most "general level, to one pole of the relationship between a subject and a person or thing defined or constituted as non-self that is different or other."<sup>167</sup> Judith Butler, like many others, argues that it is in and through our encounter with the other that we are constituted.<sup>168</sup> However, she also suggests that it is death that most complicates our relationships to both self and other. She argues that death and loss are, at an individual level, what most decentres any notion of the self as in control and autonomous. Death interrupts the story of the self because the disorienting effects of loss and grief posit "the 'I' in the mode of unknowingness."<sup>169</sup> She writes:

What grief displays [...] is the thrall in which our relations with others hold us, in ways that we cannot always recount or explain, in ways that often interrupt the self-conscious account of ourselves we might try to provide, in ways that challenge the very notion of ourselves as autonomous and in control. I might try to tell a story here about what I am feeling, but it would have to be story in which the very 'I' who seeks to tell the story is stopped in the midst of the telling; the very 'I' is called into question by its relation to the Other, a relation that does nevertheless clutter my speech with signs of its undoing. I tell a story about the relations I choose, only to expose, somewhere along the way, the way I am gripped and undone by these very relations. My narrative falters, as it must.<sup>170</sup>

Death is established as central to the self and its decentring, as the death of the other becomes what finally and firmly brings about the 'death of the self.' Furthermore, Butler argues that it is not only the death and loss of those we maintain close and proximate relationships with that interrupt the narrative of self. Rather, she argues that "I am as much constituted by those I do grieve for as by those whose deaths I disavow, whose nameless and faceless deaths form the melancholic background of my social world."<sup>171</sup> In late postmodern culture, new technologies, mediatization and globalisation have led to a heightened awareness of and exposure to the billions of others who make

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<sup>167</sup> Macey, *Dictionary of Critical Theory*, 285.

<sup>168</sup> For more on how Butler sees the self as constituted by the other see Butler, *Precarious Life*, 44.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.



up the world population, and in turn the awareness that with more life, there is inevitably more death. Both through the sharing of personal narratives of loss and in relation to the casualties of conflict, genocide and natural disasters whose experiences are rarely given a story at an individual level, death and the dead filter into our day-to-day lives and shape and punctuate our own narratives of self. The late postmodern subject, if such a thing can be gestured toward, is one that is constituted by a multitude of losses, both historical and present, real and imagined, situated within and outside of the self.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has not offered an 'accurate' story or history of the self (an impossible task). Rather it has sought to outline particular ideas about the self as constructed, unstable, a project to be worked on and a story to be told that are highly prevalent to engagement with death and the dead in late postmodern culture. The expansion of the subject has been central to the impulse, as discussed in chapter one, to hear narratives and voices from the margins and engage with death and the dead, both of which have been previously positioned by many, as examined in chapter two, as marginalised. Understandings of the self as narrative have contributed to the increasing prevalence of personal narratives of grief and autobiographical and fictional accounts about dying, death and the dead in late postmodern culture, as individualisation, new scientific knowledge and a focus on personal biographies, choice and difference have meant that individual life and death stories have taken on particular relevance. This has increased opportunities to write, voice and share personal experiences of loss. At the same time, global media coverage draws attention to the multitudes of others that occupy the planet, whose lives and deaths are often politicised, whose stories are rarely told individually, but who instead appear as what Rojek has called "statistical apparitions."<sup>172</sup>

Whereas chapter one argued that death, loss and absence permeate the structures of late postmodern culture, this chapter has argued that death, loss and absence are also central to the self – in terms of the notion of 'the death of the subject,' the decentring of any unified sense of self, and the ways in which the loss of the other both punctures and punctuates lived experience. Chapter four considers ideas about the self, as well as a range of other pertinent themes, in recent autobiographical engagement with death and the dead.

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<sup>172</sup> Rojek, *Presumed Intimacy*, 5.

## Chapter Four: Writing Death and the Self in Late Postmodern Culture

*It's always the others who die.*  
Will Self<sup>1</sup>

In *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984), a key text of British literary postmodernism, Julian Barnes writes: "Books make sense of life. The only problem is that the lives they make sense of are other people's lives, never your own."<sup>2</sup> Barnes draws attention here to the ways in which writing and writers attempt to 'make sense,' echoing the approach put forward in the introduction and considered in relation to theory, death and the self throughout chapters one, two and three. This chapter analyses autobiographical texts by three prominent English literary figures: Julian Barnes, Jenny Diski and Will Self, each of which can be read as an attempt to 'make sense' of death and the dead in the context of what has been defined here as late postmodern culture. The focus on autobiography in this chapter reflects the argument made in chapter three that autobiographical accounts and a focus on the self are particularly prevalent, and that personal accounts represent one of the ways in which death and the dead are engaged with in late postmodern culture. All of the authors under discussion here have been associated with postmodernism to differing degrees, and the texts under examination offer insight into ideas this thesis argues are increasingly central – death and the self, memory and the past, and the accountability and responsibility of the living toward the dead. Though the texts considered are difficult to classify in terms of genre, they might all be usefully related to the term autothanatography. The chapter begins with a consideration of this term before each of the three authors and their texts are considered in turn.

### Autothanatography

The term autothanatography has come to be associated with writing about death and the self that deviates from more traditional autobiographical endeavours. According to Deidre Kelly, "traditional theories of autobiography endorse the concept of a unified, coherent sense of self, grounded in a patriarchal, humanist, empiricist tradition."<sup>3</sup> As chapter three demonstrates, such a concept has been significantly undermined. Kelly argues that autobiography that strives to represent the "self-sufficiency, separation and sovereignty" of the individual can be understood as taking part in a "denial of mortality awareness."<sup>4</sup> She draws on Becker's theory of death denial, considered in

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<sup>1</sup> Will Self, "It's always the others who die," *A Point of View*, BBC Radio 4, December 8, 2013, accessed June 21, 2020, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b03k2gr3>

<sup>2</sup> Julian Barnes, *Flaubert's Parrot* (London: Vintage, 2009), 168.

<sup>3</sup> Deidre Kelly, "Looking death in the 'I': Rosa Montero's *La función Delta* as auto thanatography," *Journal of Romance Studies* 9.1 (2009): 32, doi:10.3167/jrs.2009.09010

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 32.

chapter two, which emphasises a human need to produce structures of meaning through which to interpret life.<sup>5</sup> In offering linear narratives and a clear chronology, traditional autobiographies provide “a sense of coherence and completion” and impose “the illusion of consistency and unity on a past self,” positioning that self as a “completed, closed text.”<sup>6</sup> As Davis has pointed out, the autobiographical project can certainly be understood as “an exercise in telling stories which confer a semblance of meaning onto life.”<sup>7</sup> In attempting to confer meaning, autobiography gestures toward anxieties about the absence or impossibility of meaning often at the fore in the ‘knowing’ and self-reflexive writing of postmodernism – be that writing fictional, autobiographical or, as this section will go on to consider, perhaps inevitably both.

There is no single definition of the term autothanatography. The multiplicity of ways of understanding the term coupled with its aporia, containing as it does an impossible contradiction – how can you write about your own death if you are dead? – make it particularly suited to postmodernist and deconstructionist readings. Derrida uses the term without explicit definition in *The Post Card* (1987) and elsewhere when discussing an autothanatographical narrative by Maurice Blanchot detailing his own near death by firing squad.<sup>8</sup> Callus understands autothanatography to refer to writing that “undoes logic and sense, category and genre, matter and form,” and in this sense it is in stark contrast to traditional ideas of autobiography that impose meaning, sense, and a clear progression of life through a linear narrative.<sup>9</sup> Callus suggests that if thanatographies can be defined as a “report by the living on others’ dying” then “by extension” the term autothanatographies might be “the dead’s own accounts of their own deaths.”<sup>10</sup> Callus acknowledges the impossibility of this scenario. As Linnell Secomb has written “we can describe our being-towards-death or a near-death experience but once death has overtaken us, existence is extinguished and with it the possibility of saying to those who live on: I am dead.”<sup>11</sup> Callus explains that autothanatography can be “rendered possible only through” the “unthinkable” and would “depend on the continued conceivability, to itself and to others *and after death*, of an authoring consciousness.”<sup>12</sup> He points out that literature is in some ways “replete with examples” of this kind

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<sup>5</sup> Becker, *The Denial of Death*.

<sup>6</sup> Kelly, “Looking death in the ‘I,’” 32.

<sup>7</sup> Davies, *After Poststructuralism*, 119.

<sup>8</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1987); Jacques Derrida, *Demeure: Fiction and Testimony*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenburg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).

<sup>9</sup> Ivan Callus, “(Auto)thanatography or (auto)thanatology?: Mark C. Taylor, Simon Critchley and the Writing of the Dead,” *Modern Language Studies* 41.4 (2005): 428, doi:10.1093/fmls/cqi030

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 427.

<sup>11</sup> Linnell Secomb, “Autothanatography,” *Mortality* 7:1 (2002): 33, doi: 10.1080/13576270120102535

<sup>12</sup> Callus, “(Auto)thanatography or (auto)thanatology?,” 427.

of writing.<sup>13</sup> As discussed in chapter two in relation to poetry that adopts prosopopoeia, “literature offers a number of instances of a writing affecting to be a writing *from* rather than merely *of* death.”<sup>14</sup> Autothanatography, for Callus, is writing that takes to an extreme the conceit Wordsworth identified in epitaphs, which “so often personate the deceased” and represent them as speaking from their “own tomb-stone.”<sup>15</sup> One example is the UK’s favourite epitaph – Spike Milligan’s “I told you I was ill.”<sup>16</sup> Yet Callus points out that unlike epitaphs, which Wordsworth noted were often attempts to disarm death of “its sting,” literary autothanatographies written from the perspective of the dead “tend to be more ominous,” such as Alice Sebold’s *The Lovely Bones* (2002).<sup>17</sup>

Wurth and van de Ven do not deem writing utilising prosopopoeia to be autothanatographical – merely thanatographical, or what they term “death-writings.”<sup>18</sup> The key difference for them is the distinction between fiction and autobiography. The writing they define as thanatographical might allow characters to speak from the grave or return from the dead, but these texts are not autobiographical, and as such cannot be autothanatographical. For these authors, autothanatography is not merely death-writing but “self-death-writing.”<sup>19</sup> However, Wurth and van de Ven’s division of thanatography and autothanatography is reliant on there being a distinct division between different genres of writing. The view that fiction can be clearly demarcated from autobiography or any other genre is fraught with tension. Paul de Man in particular examines the problem of trying to “define and to treat autobiography as if it were a literary genre among others.”<sup>20</sup> De Man does not use the term autothanatography and views prosopopoeia as fiction. However, he also suggests “the distinction between fiction and autobiography” is not “an either/or polarity.”<sup>21</sup> Rather than a particular “genre” or “mode,” autobiography is understood as a “figure of reading or of understanding that occurs, to some degree, in all texts.”<sup>22</sup> Gayle Letherby has argued that “all writing is in some ways auto/biography in that all texts bear traces of the author and are to

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> William Wordsworth, “Essay Upon Epitaphs,” in *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, Vol. 2, eds. W.J.B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974).

<sup>16</sup> The Telegraph, “Spike Milligan’s epitaph ‘I told you I was ill’ voted UK’s favourite,” *The Telegraph*, May 18, 2017, accessed June 23, 2020, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/culturenews/9273783/Spike-Milligans-epitaph-I-told-you-I-was-ill-voted-UKs-favourite.html>

<sup>17</sup> Callus, “(Auto)thanatography or (auto)thanatology?,” 427. Alice Sebold, *The Lovely Bones* (London: Picador, 2003).

<sup>18</sup> Kiene Brillenburg Wurth and Inge van de Ven, “Posthumously Speaking: Thanatography in a Posthuman Age,” *Frame* 25.1 (2012): 51.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>20</sup> Paul de Man, “Autobiography as De-facement,” *MLN* 94:5 (1979): 919, doi: 10.2307/2906560

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 921.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

some extent personal statements.”<sup>23</sup> Yet for de Man the autobiographical element of all writing extends beyond the writer to the reader. Both are involved in the “autobiographical moment.”<sup>24</sup> In the “process of reading” they “determine each other by mutual reflexive substitution.”<sup>25</sup> They find common ground and difference from the (imagined) other in the processes of engaging with the text and are involved in a “substitutive exchange that constitutes the subject.”<sup>26</sup> As Les Back has more recently suggested, “writing is a profoundly social activity; it connects my thoughts to yours.”<sup>27</sup>

Issues of authorship, subjectivity and the transmission of meaning are central to all texts. As de Man points out, there is a “claim to authorship that takes place whenever a text is stated to be by someone and assumed to be understandable to the extent that this is the case.”<sup>28</sup> At the same time that all texts are in some ways autobiographical, none can be. As chapter three showed, there are a number of ideas that complicate the notion of a knowing, thinking subject able to communicate their experience transparently onto the page. De Man argues that no text can be autobiographical in any straightforward way because “the name on the title page is not the proper name of a subject capable of self-knowledge and understanding, but the signature that gives the contract legal, though by no means epistemological, authority.”<sup>29</sup> Autobiography is assumed to be “rooted in a single subject whose identity is defined by the uncontested readability of his proper name,” but de Man questions whether we can be “so certain that autobiography depends on reference, as a photograph depends on its subject or a (realistic) picture on its model.”<sup>30</sup> He writes that it is wrong to “assume that life produces the autobiography as an act produces its consequences” when it is equally possible that “the autobiographical project may itself produce and determine the life,” given that “whatever the writer does is in fact governed by the technical demands of self-portraiture and thus determined, in all its aspects, by the resources of his medium.”<sup>31</sup> The subject or author has little agency and rather than shaping the autobiographical project, is shaped by it. De Man’s understanding of the relationship between writing and the self are further complicated in light of the ideas explored in chapter three that suggest that, as Julian Barnes puts it, “I, or even I, do not produce thoughts; thoughts produce me” and, as such, “in a final and disheartening (if literary) way:

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<sup>23</sup> Gayle Letherby, “Bathwater, babies and other losses: a personal and academic story,” *Mortality* 20:2 (2015): 128, doi: 10.1080/13576275.2014.989494

<sup>24</sup> De Man, “Autobiography as De-facement,” 921.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Back, *Academic Diary*, 194.

<sup>28</sup> De Man, “Autobiography as De-facement,” 921.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 922.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 920.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

the 'I' of which we are so fond properly exists only in grammar."<sup>32</sup> There are many reasons to believe that there is discord between our experiences and our own narratives of our experiences. Yet for de Man what is most interesting about autobiography is that, rather than revealing "reliable self-knowledge," it "demonstrates in a striking way the impossibility of closure and of totalization."<sup>33</sup> Autothanatographical writing is, for some, writing that grapples with this impossibility.

For Burt, autothanatography is writing engaged with complex ideas about death and selfhood. It is "the writing of the death of the subject" and writing that "testifies in and to the absence of the I."<sup>34</sup> On one level this might merely mean that autothanatographical writing makes explicit the absence of the dead by being, after their death, what they have left behind, which would mean all writing is or will be autothanatographical. However, Burt seems to be gesturing through the phrase 'the death of the subject' to broader poststructuralist, postmodernist and psychoanalytic ideas about language and subjectivity, implying that writing explicitly and self-reflexively concerned with ideas about the self, life and death, can be understood as autothanatographical, and as writing in which a "discourse about experience becomes a discourse about the structure and conditions of experience."<sup>35</sup> Kelly seems to hold a similar view. Traditional autobiographies risk killing off "the teleological, experiential, evolving subject-in-process" but autothanatography, in contrast, can be understood to "embrace elements that help the writer to come to terms with death, such as mutability, change and transience."<sup>36</sup> She considers autothanatographies to be the self-reflexive writings of those "facing death and physical metamorphosis," considering "concepts of time and identity from a different perspective."<sup>37</sup> Though this chapter will not argue that any of the texts examined here are attempts to 'come to terms' with death, given that they seem instead to emphasise the impossibility of this task, they can all be seen to explore time, avoid the chronological and linear, and to show a concern with identity, transience and mutability.

Autothanatography has been directly associated with postmodernity. As chapter three argues, narratives about death and dying have proliferated in recent decades. Neil Small specifically notes the rise of autobiographies about dying that occurred in the 1990s. He points out that though these were not unprecedented, they were differentiated by the context in which they were

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<sup>32</sup> Barnes, *Nothing*, 150.

<sup>33</sup> De Man, "Autobiography as De-facement," 922.

<sup>34</sup> E.S. Burt, *Regard for the Other: Autothanatography in Rousseau, De Quincey, Baudelaire, & Wilde* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009), 17.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 33.

occurring and in particular by the impact of AIDS, which, as discussed in chapter two in relation to examples such as Derek Jarman's film *Blue*, "elevated some aspects of death and dying to a new prominence."<sup>38</sup> Small examines the writing of Oscar Moore and Harold Brodkey, both novelists who died of AIDS-related illnesses who "chronicled the final stages of their lives."<sup>39</sup> Small suggests that "individual narratives" linking public and private are where "the politics of the postmodern are most clearly played out."<sup>40</sup> Small also associates autothanatographies with the wider conditions of postmodernity, with "shifting patterns of public expressiveness and changes in the public/private interface" as well as a "breakdown in the belief in the omnipotence of medicine or, indeed, of any other meta-narrative."<sup>41</sup> Echoing many of those cited in chapter two, Small argues that "an individual is left without ready recourse to a single, prescriptive, narrative as to what to expect or what to do" when it comes to dying, not because "narratives are absent," but because in postmodernity "they proliferate and people must select from them in creating their own."<sup>42</sup> Here Small also emphasises, as chapter three of this thesis does, the impetus on the individual to construct their own narrative throughout life and when approaching death. As will be discussed later in this chapter in relation to Jenny Diski, autobiographical texts centred on terminal illness continue to proliferate in written form in magazines, blogs and books, as well as in video blogs, podcasts and more traditional broadcast media.

Callus has also implied a parallel between autothanatography and postmodernism by associating autothanatography with irony. As discussed in chapter one, irony is often deemed the ultimate postmodern mode and David Foster Wallace saw the exhaustion of irony as bringing about the death of postmodernism proper. Callus suggests that in proceeding "as if death might be undone and discountenanced by a writing that coincides with death itself," autothanatography might "provide the sharpest of irony's edges."<sup>43</sup> Like postmodernism, the term autothanatography also has "diverse fictions and affiliations" and can be understood as transgressive and difficult to pin down.<sup>44</sup> It is as such that Callus cautions against asking the "genre question" or trying to ascertain whether a text is "(auto)thanatography or (auto)thanatology," or whether it fits a particular definition of a related term.<sup>45</sup> Callus argues that "autothanatographies institute themselves as arguably the most

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<sup>38</sup> Neil Small, "Death of the authors," *Mortality* 3:3 (1998): 222, doi: 10.1080/713685957

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 216.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 226.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 224.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> Callus, "(Auto)thanatography or (auto)thanatology?," 437.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 436.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 435.

extreme of boundary-bending and demarcation-transgressing texts: they tremble, after all, at the absoluteness of the division between life and death.”<sup>46</sup> Autothanatographical writing is defined in this chapter as highly self-aware (to the extent of being aware of the impossibility of being self-aware) autobiographical writing that is explicitly concerned with death, selfhood and the limits of the autobiographical project. Barnes’s writings reflect a significant lifelong interest in death and include moving reflections on his own experiences of grief. Diski’s diary entries for the *London Review of Books*, published as *In Gratitude* (2016), grapple with the challenge of writing “another fucking cancer diary” with the “same story, same ending.”<sup>47</sup> Self reflects on the place of the dead, in particular his dead mother, in the twenty-first century *zeitgeist* for BBC Radio 4’s *A Point of View*. Each author is examined in turn, with three central themes identified in Barnes’s significant body of writing on death, two in Diski’s text, and one in Self’s autobiographical engagement with death and the dead.

### Julian Barnes

As chapter two noted, there are good reasons to consider Barnes a twenty-first century ‘expert’ on death, with a section of his autobiographical text *Nothing to Be Frightened Of* having been repackaged and titled *Death* for the Vintage Minis series in 2017.<sup>48</sup> Barnes intended to open *Nothing to Be Frightened Of* with the line “Let’s get this death thing straight,” making evident his interest in ‘making sense’ of death.<sup>49</sup> Ultimately he began it with another line, which read “I don’t believe in God, but I miss him,” signalling his concern with the consequences of secularisation, in particular when it comes to death. Much of Barnes’s writing features death as a central theme, and he has described his “obsession” with death as coming from “not wanting to be dead and not liking the idea of being dead.”<sup>50</sup> His frequent use of irony combined with the tendency to associate him primarily with *Flaubert’s Parrot* has led to an “unhappy yet persistent conflation of Barnes with postmodernism,” despite his varied oeuvre including essays, short stories, translations, novels under his own name and the pseudonym Dan Kavanagh.<sup>51</sup> Groes and Childs find his association with postmodernism to be oversimplifying and have pointed out that Barnes’s “work was not postmodernist upon its arrival, but nevertheless became central to shaping the moment of British

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 429.

<sup>47</sup> Jenny Diski, *In Gratitude* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 11, 12.

<sup>48</sup> Barnes, *Nothing*; Barnes, *Death*.

<sup>49</sup> Julian Barnes interviewed by Vanessa Guignery and Ryan Roberts, in *Conversations with Julian Barnes*, edited by Vanessa Guignery and Ryan Roberts (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009), 162.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 161.

<sup>51</sup> Sebastian Groes and Peter Childs, “Introduction,” in *Julian Barnes* eds. Sebastian Groes and Peter Childs (London: Continuum, 2011), 2.



high postmodernism in the 1980s.”<sup>52</sup> Chapter one argues that postmodernism took a melancholy turn in the 1990s. If Barnes’s writing is easily identified as exploiting irony, it is as easily identifiable as melancholy. Matthew Paterman, who has described Barnes’s books as “melancholic meditations,” wrote to Barnes to ask for assistance with his PhD.<sup>53</sup> He received a prompt response, which consisted of a postcard of an Arundel tomb with two stone figures side by side and a note that said “while I am glad you are reading my books, being studied and researched makes me feel like this” with an arrow pointing to the stones on the front of the postcard.<sup>54</sup> This kind of wry reference to death can be located in much of Barnes’s writing, as can a melancholy tone. Though Barnes’s writing is consistently funny, he has himself stated:

there is probably a pervasive melancholy in a lot of what I write. I think that this partly comes from the objective assessment of the human condition, the inevitability of extinction – and also from an objective look at how many people’s lives turn out and how rarely achievement matches intention.<sup>55</sup>

The focus here will be on Barnes’s two most obviously autobiographical texts, *Nothing to Be Frightened Of* and the third chapter of *Levels of Life*. Childs has written that *Nothing to Be Frightened Of*, despite being “scattered with personal reflections,” reveals little of Barnes’s life.<sup>56</sup> The playful title implies that in a secular context, after death there is literally ‘nothing’ to be frightened of. The later *Levels of Life* reveals much more of the author’s emotional life and is associated here with what this thesis argues is evidence of a productive melancholy in late postmodern culture. It is a moving meditation on love and grief dedicated to his wife Pat Kavanagh who died in 2008. The book can be read as fiction, memoir and historical writing, with the last of its three chapters offering an explicitly autobiographical account of grief.

Much of Barnes’s writing can be understood as autothanatographical due to its self-conscious engagement with the limitations of autobiography, refusal to be categorised into a particular genre, and explicit concern with death and subjectivity. In *The Sense of an Ending* (2011), Barnes engages with the notion of the self as a narrative that we tell ourselves, writing:

How often do we tell our own life story? How often do we adjust, embellish, make sly cuts? And the longer life goes on, the fewer are those around to challenge our account, to remind

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Matthew Paterman, *Julian Barnes* (Tavistock: Northcote House, 2002), 3.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid. Barnes is alluding here to Philip Larkin’s poem ‘An Arundel Tomb’ and in turn what is often regarded as the greatest poem about death written in the English language, Larkin’s ‘Aubade,’ which Barnes makes subtle references to elsewhere in his autobiographical writing. Philip Larkin, “An Arundel Tomb,” in *Six Poets Hardy to Larkin An Anthology* by Alan Bennett (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), 200-201; Philip Larkin, “Aubade,” in *Six Poets Hardy to Larkin An Anthology* by Alan Bennett (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), 203-204.

<sup>55</sup> Julian Barnes interviewed by Rudolf Freiburg, in *Conversations with Julian Barnes*, edited by Vanessa Guignery and Ryan Roberts (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009), 35.

<sup>56</sup> Peter Childs, *Julian Barnes* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), 2.

us that our life is not our life, merely the story we have told about our life. Told to others, but—mainly—to ourselves.<sup>57</sup>

In *Nothing to Be Frightened Of* he expresses a similar sentiment, suggesting that efforts to impose a sense of wholeness or meaning onto life can be understood as “putting accidents in order” and “little more than confabulating: processing strange, incomprehensible, contradictory input into some kind, any kind, of believable story – but believable mainly to ourselves.”<sup>58</sup> Barnes has also cautioned against understanding death as part of a tidy narrative of life. He paraphrases Jules Renard, warning that “we shouldn’t think of death as being something that comes into our life at a particular artistic moment, i.e., to bring our life’s story to its appropriate conclusion. Death is much more of a sort of foursquare butcher who doesn’t take us into consideration at all.”<sup>59</sup> As discussed in chapter two, Barnes can also be understood as adhering to the death denial argument. He has explained his interest in death as a “sort of low-to-medium level, practical, sensible fearing but in the context of [...] widespread ignorance of and resistance to thinking about it.”<sup>60</sup> He writes:

I have seen two dead people, and touched one of them; but I’ve never seen anyone die, and may never do so, unless and until I see myself die. If death ceased to be talked about when it first really began to be feared, and then more so when we started to live longer, it has also gone off the agenda because it has ceased to be there, with us, in the house. Nowadays we make death as invisible as possible, and part of a process – from doctor to hospital to undertaker to crematorium – in which professionals and bureaucrats tell us what to do, up to the point where we are left to ourselves, survivors standing with a glass in our hands, amateurs learning how to mourn.<sup>61</sup>

The above extract was published in 2008 before his wife was diagnosed with cancer. Then, he wrote, “it was thirty-seven days from diagnosis to death. I tried never to look away, always to face it.”<sup>62</sup> Barnes’s reflections on death in *Nothing to Be Frightened Of* are often abstract and theoretical. In *Levels of Life*, it is clear that Barnes has “entered a new geography” of grief.<sup>63</sup> Though many of the themes remain consistent – the limits of science, the absence of God, the importance of memory – the tone and texture of the two texts are markedly different. The discussion of them here is presented in three central themes that emerge in both: the intersections of death and the self, the importance of belief and the complexities of remembering.

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<sup>57</sup> Julian Barnes, *The Sense of an Ending* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2011), 95.

<sup>58</sup> Barnes, *Nothing*, 150.

<sup>59</sup> Julian Barnes interviewed by Kenneth Whyte, “Maclean’s Interview: Julian Barnes,” 30 October 30, 2008, accessed June 23, 2020, <https://www.macleans.ca/general/julian-barnes/>

<sup>60</sup> Julian Barnes interviewed by Vanessa Guignery and Ryan Roberts, in *Conversations with Julian Barnes*, edited by Vanessa Guignery and Ryan Roberts (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009), 161.

<sup>61</sup> Barnes, *Nothing*, 132-133.

<sup>62</sup> Julian Barnes, *Levels of Life* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2013), 68.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

## Death and the self

*Nothing to Be Frightened Of* in particular seems to be an effort to ‘make sense’ of death. Barnes explains that as a teenager he used to believe that “the burdensome process of growing up ended with a man standing by himself at last – *homo erectus* at full height, *sapiens* in full wisdom - a fellow now cracking the whip on his own account.”<sup>64</sup> New scientific knowledge soon undermined this “vaguely, Englishy, existentialist ego-hope of autonomy.”<sup>65</sup> He reflects on the ways in which the achievements of ‘human progress’ and the rise of the autonomous individual subject discussed in chapter three paradoxically led to a disempowering perspective on the self: “individualism – the triumph of free-thinking artists and scientists – has led us to a stage of self-awareness in which we can now view ourselves as units of genetic obedience.”<sup>66</sup> Knowledge about genetics led Barnes to suspect that

far from having a whip to crack, I am the very tip of the whip itself, and that what is cracking me is a long and inevitable plait of genetic material which cannot be shrugged or fought off. My ‘individuality’ may still be felt, and genetically provable; but it may be the very opposite of the achievement I once took it for.<sup>67</sup>

Lack of agency is emphasised as the self is refigured from an achievement into what might be better described as an accident. Barnes ponders the consequences of this way of thinking when it comes to dying, when “preparing to lament an old-fashioned, constructed-through-life self” would be a case of “an illusion mourning an illusion, a mere chance bundle needlessly distraught about unbundling.”<sup>68</sup> However, Barnes doubts this is how it will feel to him when the “time comes.”<sup>69</sup> On his deathbed, he wants to “remain” in what he will “obstinately think of,” whether it is ‘true’ or not, as his “character.”<sup>70</sup> Yet as he ages, he notices the ways in which he is increasingly less ‘himself.’ He comes to resemble his father, exhibiting behaviours that he deems “genetic replicas and definitely not expressions of free will,” such as the angle he sits at the table, the hang of his jaw and his laugh.<sup>71</sup> What Barnes thinks of as his character might be neither innate nor a construction, but rather a temporary sense of self to be inevitably deposed by a genetic inheritance as the body ages and approaches death. His autobiographical writing engages with a range of ideas examined in chapter three, emphasising the ways in which shifts in thinking about the self in turn shape thinking about death.

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<sup>64</sup> Barnes, *Nothing*, 94.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 93-94.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 118-2.

Barnes expresses a sense of “wonder” at the idea of a “blind and fortuitous process which has blindly and fortuitously produced us.”<sup>72</sup> However, he ponders the limitations of new and particularly secular and scientific understandings of the self when it comes to the end of life, asking:

do we get any better at dying? Will you die better, shall I die better, will Richard Dawkins die better than our genetic ancestors hundreds or thousands of years ago? Dawkins has expressed the hope that ‘When I am dying, I should like my life taken out under general anaesthetic, exactly as if it were a diseased appendix.’ Clear enough, if illegal; yet death has an obstinate way of denying us the solutions we imagine for ourselves. From a medical point of view – and depending where we live on the planet – we may well die better [...] But that’s a different matter from looking forward to what is immediately ahead: total extinction. Are we going to get any better at that? I don’t see why we should. I don’t see why our cleverness or self-awareness should make things better rather than worse. Why should those genes in whose silent servitude we dwell spare us any terror?<sup>73</sup>

He emphasises that death is subject to the same intersections of privilege as everything else in life and contrasts a medical point of view with an existential one, drawing attention to the ways in which knowledge can be ‘made sense’ of differently. His reference to “our cleverness or self-awareness” motions toward human hubris but perhaps also toward postmodernism, often positioned as characterised by self-awareness and a ‘knowing’ tone, and toward the naivety of interpreting advancements in knowledge and understanding in purely celebratory terms. Barnes questions what, if any, comfort changing ideas about the self can actually offer when it comes to thinking about death. He speculates that “we shall probably die in a hospital, you and I: a modern death, with little folklore present.”<sup>74</sup> Barnes defines “a modern death” as the kind his father had: “in hospital, without his family, attended in his final minutes by a nurse, months – indeed, years – after medical science had prolonged his life to a point where the terms on which it was being offered were unimpressive.”<sup>75</sup> He writes:

What you – I – will be clinging on to is not a few more minutes in a warm baronial hall with the smell of roast chicken and the cheery noise of fife and drum, not a few more days or hours of real living, but a few more days and hours of breathing decrepitude, mind gone, muscles wasted, bladder leaking.<sup>76</sup>

Barnes’s comparison is both poignant and ironic, contrasting “a modern death” with a romanticised ideal of a medieval death and echoing Ariès historical stages of death discussed in chapter two. The less desirable consequences of the extension of life are emphasised along with the physicality of the

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 94-5.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 202.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 112-3.

body and questions are raised about what constitutes “real living,” gesturing toward debates about assisted dying and the politicisation of death. Barnes’s inclusion of his own pause and addition of himself in the fragment “you – I –” emphasises that though, as this thesis has emphasised, every death is unique, social patterns are also evident when it comes to death. This perhaps speaks to the popularity of Barnes’s writing, which may resonate with many who have witnessed what Barnes describes as a ‘modern’ death.

Barnes wonders whether science could advance to a point where, whilst keeping the body alive, it might also be able to eliminate fear of death. Perhaps in time “medicine will develop a procedure allowing us to master that part of the brain which considers its own death.”<sup>77</sup> He obliquely references the Kübler-Ross model of grief and suggests that, “as with the patient-operated morphine drip, we might, at a thumb-click, be able to control our own death-mood and death-feelings. Denial *click* Anger *click click* Bargaining – ah that’s better.”<sup>78</sup> Barnes lists platitudes that might reveal themselves as truth under such circumstances:

We shall feel gratitude for our lucky lives when so many trillions and trillions of potential people went unborn [...] think of ourselves as a fruit happy to drop from the twig, a crop serene about its harvesting [...] proud to make room for others as others have made room for us. We shall feel convinced and consoled by that medieval image of the burden flying in the lighted hall and flying out the other side. And what, after all, could be more useful to us as dying animals? Welcome to the Euphoria Ward.<sup>79</sup>

Incredulity underlies these assertions, implying that these ways of thinking offer little comfort and the limits of science and medicine are foregrounded in terms of preparing for your own death. In *Levels of Life*, Barnes is critical of the medicalisation of death in terms of the death of the other. There, he writes that after his wife’s death “only the old words would do: death, grief, sorrow, sadness, heartbreak. Nothing modernly evasive or medicalising. Grief is a human, not a medical, condition, and while there are pills to help us forget it – and everything else – there are no pills to cure it.”<sup>80</sup> The medicalisation of grief is positioned as an unwelcome intrusion, and language is positioned as central to the ways in which experience and the self are articulated and understood.

Barnes further reflects on the importance of language when considering how death might be ‘made sense’ of in a context in which the self has been declared dead by “brain mappers” who “have

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 201.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 201-2.

<sup>80</sup> Barnes, *Levels*, 71.

penetrated our cerebral secrets” and told “us that there is no one at home.”<sup>81</sup> Barnes hears a “specialist in consciousness” discussing “how there is no centre to the brain – no location of self – either physically or computationally.”<sup>82</sup> She suggests the notion of free will should be discarded because what we are is “machines for copying and handing on bits of culture.”<sup>83</sup> The expert may have been Blackmore, whose views on humans as carriers for memes were discussed in chapter three, or another expert who shares a similar view. When asked how she will view her own death, she responds: “I would view it with equanimity, as just another step [...] Live life fully now, here – do the best you can, and if you ask me why I should do that – I don’t know [...] that’s what this thing does. And I expect it to do it on its death bed.”<sup>84</sup> Barnes points out “the demise here of the personal pronoun. ‘I’ has mutated ‘into ‘it’ and ‘this thing,’ a switch both alarming and instructive.”<sup>85</sup> He suggests that “as human character is being re-thought, human language must be rethought with it.”<sup>86</sup> For Barnes, the relationship between conceptualisations of the self and thinking about dying are evident. The way that the self is understood and articulated has significant consequences, as the “demise [...] of the personal pronoun” means the ‘death of the self’ occurs long before physical death, which might represent not the death of an “I,” but the death of an “it.”

## Belief

The loss of religion – specifically Christianity in England – is a prominent theme in much of Barnes’s writing. He states that “religion used to offer consolation for the travails of life, and reward at the end of it for the faithful. But above and beyond these treats, it gave human life a sense of context, and therefore seriousness.”<sup>87</sup> He does not believe himself, bluntly describing religion as “a supreme fiction” and suggesting that “it is normal to feel bereft on closing a great novel.”<sup>88</sup> Barnes often extends his lack of faith to his reader, adopting the plural pronoun ‘we’ and writing: “We do not believe, we have insistently not believed for decades, more than half a century in some cases; but we do not like what we see ahead of us, and our resources for dealing with it are not as good as they might be.”<sup>89</sup> He perhaps uses ‘we’ to refer the imagined reader who is constituted, as de Man suggests, in the process of the author’s writing and our reading. If this reader is assumed to be a middle-class English atheist or agnostic, they are perhaps also deemed to be the subject of a secular,

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<sup>81</sup> Barnes, *Nothing*, 150.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 184.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 184-5.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 186.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> Barnes, *Nothing*, 81.

death-denying west. Barnes's writing about religion might be considered dismissive of the importance of faith in many people's lives, as well as nostalgic, implicitly tied to particular constructions of English national identity. He has stated that he is "obviously talking about the traditional white English [...] remnant or whatever we call ourselves."<sup>90</sup> He sees the way Christianity, specifically Anglicanism, has "seeped away" in his own family as an example of wider shifts.<sup>91</sup> Though in some ways he apes the cultural stereotype of a 'smug atheist,' he regularly describes himself as an agnostic and frequently pokes fun at the world's "second most annoying atheist" Richard Dawkins.<sup>92</sup> Barnes caricatures Dawkins, writing: "Grow up, says Dawkins. God is an imaginary friend. When you're dead, you're dead. If you want a sense of spiritual awe, get it from contemplating the Milky Way through a telescope."<sup>93</sup> While light-hearted in *Nothing to be Frightened Of*, Barnes's consideration of religion tends to feel more poignant in *Levels of Life*. He echoes the phrase "when you're dead, you're dead" there, writing of his wife: "I do not believe I shall ever see her again. Never see, hear, touch, embrace, listen to, laugh with [...] Nor do I believe we shall meet again in some dematerialised form. I believe dead is dead."<sup>94</sup> Belief, or lack thereof, is consistently at the fore, though the tone and texture of the discussion shifts.

In *Levels of Life*, Barnes again emphasises that "we are bad at dealing with death, that banal, unique thing; we can no longer make it part of a wider pattern."<sup>95</sup> He relates this directly to secularism, and to ideas about the 'death of the self,' writing:

When we killed – or exiled – God, we also killed ourselves. Did we notice that sufficiently at the time? No God, no afterlife, no us. We were right to kill Him, of course, this long-standing imaginary friend of ours. And we weren't going to get an afterlife anyway. But we sawed off the branch we were sitting on. And the view from there, from that height – even if it was only the illusion of a view – wasn't so bad.<sup>96</sup>

Barnes suggests that both the notion of a self after death, via an afterlife, and existing ideas of the self, heavily influenced by religion, are lost without religious faith. Barnes's use of the plural pronoun here is again stark and implies that his own lack of faith in any God or an afterlife can be extended to those he includes, or who might choose to include themselves, within the constructed 'we' or 'us'

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<sup>90</sup> Julian Barnes interviewed by Vanessa Guignery and Ryan Roberts, in *Conversations with Julian Barnes*, edited by Vanessa Guignery and Ryan Roberts (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009), 166.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Matthew Singer, "The World's Most Annoying Atheists," February 8, 2016, accessed June 23, 2020, <https://www.wweek.com/arts/2016/02/08/the-worlds-most-annoying-atheists/>

<sup>93</sup> Barnes, *Nothing*, 89.

<sup>94</sup> Barnes, *Levels*, 78. Barnes is likely drawing the phrase "when you're dead, you're dead" from Kurt Vonnegut, who wrote in the introduction to his 1961 novel *Mother Night* that "there's another clear moral to this tale, now that I think about it: When you're dead you're dead." (London: Vintage, 2009), viii.

<sup>95</sup> Barnes, *Levels*, 69.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 86.

discussed above, though there are many whose religious or secular beliefs do include an afterlife and with whom his use of 'we' and 'us' might fail to resonate. Though at times Barnes positions religion as an effective resource for 'dealing' with death, he also questions whether any belief system or text can ever really help with grieving. He writes:

you can never prepare for this new reality in which you have been dunked. I know someone who thought, or hoped, she could. Her husband was a long time dying of cancer; being practical, she asked in advance for a reading list, and assembled the classic texts of bereavement. They made no difference when the moment came.<sup>97</sup>

It is evident to the reader that Barnes himself has been steeped in writing about death and grief, given his writing is littered with references to other authors' views on the subject. He writes that it is impossible to prepare for profound loss because "grief destroys all patterns, destroys even more: the belief that any pattern exists."<sup>98</sup> Here he suggests that even if he had faith to make grief "part of a wider pattern," that faith might not have survived his loss.<sup>99</sup> Yet he also writes that "we cannot, I think, survive" without belief in some kind of pattern.<sup>100</sup> As such "each of us must pretend to find, or re-erect, a pattern. Writers believe in the patterns their words make, which they hope and trust add up to ideas, to stories, to truths."<sup>101</sup> If reading cannot prepare you for profound loss then the process of writing at least seems to offer a way to rebuild patterns of meaning. Yet Barnes's use of the word "pretend" implies that a belief in any pattern of meaning might, like the notion of the self, be little more than a necessary illusion.

## Remembering

Memory, itself a kind of pattern-making, is positioned as the foundation of identity, as problematic and untrustworthy, and as potentially restorative in Barnes's writing. Barnes asserts that "memory is identity."<sup>102</sup> He tells us that "you are what you have done; what you have done is in your memory; what you remember defines who you are; when you forget your life you cease to be, even before your death."<sup>103</sup> This idea might resonate with many in a context like the UK where 850,000 people are living with dementia.<sup>104</sup> Yet despite his emphasis on the importance of memory, Barnes is distrustful of it. His brother, a philosopher, expresses his own reticence about memory. Having relayed to Barnes the moment he realised religion was "a load of balls on 7 Feb 1952, at 9.00," he

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 85-86.

<sup>102</sup> Barnes, *Nothing*, 140.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Alzheimer's Society, "Facts for the media," 2019, accessed June 23, 2020, <https://www.alzheimers.org.uk/about-us/news-and-media/facts-media>



expresses a hope that “this story is true.”<sup>105</sup> Though it is “certainly a very clear and lasting memory,” he cautions that “you know what memory is.”<sup>106</sup> He implies that memory too is “a load of balls,” more likely stories that we have come to believe about ourselves than anything else. What Barnes distrusts about memories is “the way we colour them in.”<sup>107</sup> If memory is identity, but memory is also a narrative, embellished and repeated, then identity is a narrative too, and when we can no longer rehearse that story, we are no longer, in the same way, alive.

Cautious about the ‘truth’ of memory yet convinced of its centrality to the self, Barnes also positions it as potentially restorative, capable of keeping the dead alive. In *Nothing to Be Frightened Of* Barnes puts forward the idea of intergenerational memory as a vehicle for the maintenance of the self after death, or the notion that “your children ‘carry you on’ after your death.”<sup>108</sup> He wonders:

How far does such ‘carrying on’ go? One generation, two, three? What happens when you reach the first generation born after you are dead, the one with no possible memory of you, and for whom you are mere folklore? Will you be carried on by them, and will they know that this is what they are doing? As the great Irish short story writer Frank O’Connor put it: folklore ‘can never get anything right.’<sup>109</sup>

Again, the untrustworthiness of memory comes to the fore as memories, if they were ever entirely separable from fiction, over time transform into stories. Elsewhere, Barnes considers the restorative potential of memory not in terms of maintaining a narrative of the dead, but in terms of bringing them back. He suggests that the confusion of time experienced by those with dementia combined with the power of memory might allow the living to experience the return of lost loved ones, writing: “Grandma, in her dementia, believed my mother was a sister of hers who had been dead for fifty years. My mother, in turn, welcomed back all of the relatives she had known in childhood, come to express concern for her.”<sup>110</sup> Here the distrustfulness of memory can be interpreted as comforting and consolatory. Though the loss of memory has been positioned by Barnes elsewhere as a kind of living death – “when you forget your life you cease to be, even before your death” – here the drifting and evocative qualities of memory become more powerful and transformative as it falters.<sup>111</sup> “In time,” Barnes jokes “our family will come for my brother and for me (only please don’t send my

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<sup>105</sup> Barnes, *Nothing*, 14.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 183.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid, 140.

mother).”<sup>112</sup> Though such a return of the dead caused by the mind’s decline would be nothing more than an illusion come to farewell an illusion, this kind of regenerative remembering might provide some solace.

In *Levels of Life* Barnes again considers whether it might be possible to keep the dead alive through memory, though in a different context. Thinking about the time shortly after his wife’s death, Barnes writes:

It took a while, but I remember the moment – or rather, the suddenly arriving argument – which made it less likely that I would kill myself. I realised that, insofar as she was alive at all, she was alive in my memory [...] I was her principal remember. If she was anywhere, she was within me, internalised.<sup>113</sup>

Barnes’s conception of the “principal remember” is reminiscent of a range of powerful cultural narratives in literature, psychoanalysis and art that suggest, as Robert Montgomery’s light poem does, that *the people you love become ghosts inside of you and like this you keep them alive*.<sup>114</sup> A pattern emerges here between the “pervasive melancholy” that Barnes has identified in his own writing and Freud’s conception of melancholia.<sup>115</sup> In ‘Mourning and Melancholia’ (1915) Freud suggested that if an “identification” had taken place and the lost object had been internalised and set up inside the ego, melancholia was in place.<sup>116</sup> ‘Healthy’ mourning, in Freud’s early writing on grief, was mourning in which those who were lost were rejected and replaced. Understood in this way, Barnes’s internalisation of his wife and his adoption of the role of “principal remember” as a way to exercise her presence might be understood as adhering to a Freudian definition of melancholia, and to other theories of grief that focus on ideas around the internalisation of the other.

Though often overlooked in writing that focuses only on the essay ‘Mourning and Melancholia,’ in the development of his theory of grief in ‘The Ego and the Id’ (1923) Freud reconsidered the relationship between mourning, melancholia and the internalisation of the lost other, stating that he had not formerly appreciated “the full significance” of the process of incorporation and “did not know how common and how typical” it was.<sup>117</sup> He concluded it was by

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>113</sup> Barnes, *Levels*, 90.

<sup>114</sup> Robert Montgomery, *The people you love become ghosts inside of you and like this you keep them alive*, Painted Wood And Solar Powered LED Lights, no date.

<sup>115</sup> Julian Barnes interviewed by Rudolf Freiburg, in *Conversations with Julian Barnes*, edited by Vanessa Guignery and Ryan Roberts (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009), 35.

<sup>116</sup> Sigmund Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” *Standard Edition*, 14: 249.

<sup>117</sup> Sigmund Freud, “The Ego and the Id,” *Standard Edition*, 19: 28.

identification with lost attachments as a child that one's losses (the father, the mother) were negotiated and, as Tammy Clewell notes, that "it is only by internalizing the lost other through the work of bereaved identification [...] that one becomes a subject in the first place."<sup>118</sup> According to this understanding, the self is not wholly independent and does not rely on the rejection or replacement of its losses. Rather, the self is "a precipitate of abandoned object-cathexes,"<sup>119</sup> constituted by its losses and formed of what Clewell has called "an embodied history of lost attachments."<sup>120</sup> Freud came to understand the melancholy identification he initially deemed pathological to be both a 'normal' part of mourning and core to the self, wherein the dead are sustained as an absence within. Reflecting on his daughter's death, Freud wrote that "no matter what may fill the gap, even if it be filled completely, it nevertheless remains something else," and "this is how it should be. It is the only way of perpetuating that love which we do not want to relinquish."<sup>121</sup> Yet as others have pointed out, it was Freud's early theory and not his reflections on his later experience that came to dominate ideas about 'healthy' grief in and beyond the twentieth century, as "the post-Freud paradigm for understanding grief has maintained the idea that the primary goal of grieving is to cut the bond with the deceased so that new attachments can be formed."<sup>122</sup>

Freud's wish to perpetuate his love for his daughter and Barnes's need to practise remembering as a way to affirm his wife's presence accord with the sentiments this thesis argues are now increasingly prevalent in late postmodern culture, which emphasise the importance of continued relationships between the living and the dead. They resonate too with the notion of continuing bonds, put forward in 1996 by Klass, Silverman and Nickman, which suggests that "survivors hold the deceased in loving memory for long periods, often forever, and that maintaining an inner representation of the deceased is normal rather than abnormal."<sup>123</sup> According to this perspective, "the deceased are both present and not present at the same time. It is possible to be bereft and not bereft simultaneously, to have a sense of continuity and yet to know that nothing will ever be the same."<sup>124</sup> The acceptance of contradiction and ambivalence at the core of this sentiment coincide both with the definition of late postmodern culture set out in chapter one, and with the

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<sup>118</sup> Clewell, "Mourning Beyond Melancholia," 60.

<sup>119</sup> Freud, "The Ego and the Id," 29.

<sup>120</sup> Clewell, "Mourning Beyond Melancholia," 56.

<sup>121</sup> Sigmund Freud, "Letter from Sigmund Freud to Ludwig Binswanger, April 11, 1929," in *Letters of Sigmund Freud 1873-1939*, ed. Ernst L. Freud, trans. James Stern and Tania Stern (London: The Hogarth Press, 1970), 386.

<sup>122</sup> Phyllis. R. Silverman and Dennis Klass, "Introduction: What's the Problem?" in *Continuing Bonds: New Understandings of Grief*, eds. Dennis Klass, Phyllis R. Silverman and Steven L. Nickman (Abingdon and New York, Routledge, 1996), 7.

<sup>123</sup> Phyllis. R. Silverman and Steven L. Nickman, "Concluding Thoughts," in *Continuing Bonds*, 349.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 351.

complex and ambivalent positioning of death and the dead within late postmodern culture set out in chapter two. Expressing a similar sentiment to that of Klass, Silverman and Nickman on the simultaneous presence and absence of the dead, Barnes writes that the “fact that someone is dead may mean they are not alive, but doesn’t mean that they do not exist.”<sup>125</sup> He talks to his wife “constantly” and is able to “externalise her easily and naturally because” he has “internalised her.”<sup>126</sup> This is “the paradox of grief: if I have survived what is now four years of her absence, it is because I have had four years of her presence.”<sup>127</sup> Citing Ford Maddox Ford, who said “you marry to continue the conversation,” Barnes asks: “Why allow death to interrupt it?”<sup>128</sup> The voice of the other can be revived and sustained in memory and imagination and conversations between the living and dead can form a meaningful, valuable and ongoing part of experience.

Despite the importance of memory in providing Barnes with the responsibility and identity of being his wife’s “principal remember,” his concerns about the limitations of memory persist. He finds his memory falters, as he is only able to recall the year before she died: “she is slipping away from me a second time: first I lose her in the present, then I lose her in the past. Memory – the mind’s photographic archive – is failing.”<sup>129</sup> He is told this is quite normal and that his memories will return. They do, but even then, he is “not sure it is the same memory,” as it “can no longer be corroborated by the one who was there at the time [...] ‘We’ are now watered down to ‘I’. Binocular memory has become monocular.”<sup>130</sup> This resonates with concerns about mourning expressed by Derrida, who, writing about the death of his friend Paul de Man, worried that internalising the dead other might mean destroying their alterity, their ‘otherness’ as, like Barnes’s suggests, ‘we’ becomes ‘I’. By making someone “a *part of us*,” Derrida writes, the “other no longer quite seems to be the other.”<sup>131</sup> For Derrida, discussed further in the next chapter, it is refusing to internalise the dead that makes it possible to respect their difference. Barnes’s constant conversation with his wife and his ideas about the restorative power of writing also resonate with Derrida’s anti-consolatory conception of mourning, which, according to Joan Kirkby, suggests:

The structure of mourning is that of an ongoing conversation with the dead. We engage with the other, who, although wholly other as he has always been, is now within us, constitutive of our interiority and self-relation; however, we engage with them not in a private, secret,

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<sup>125</sup> Barnes, *Levels*, 102.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 102-3.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>131</sup> Jacques Derrida, *MEMOIRES for Paul de Man*, trans. Cecile Lindsay, Jonathan Culler, Eduardo Cadava, and Peggy Kamuf (New York: 1989), 35. Italics in original.

phobic, guilty internalising memory, but [...] a thinking externalising memory that gives us over to writing and thought.<sup>132</sup>

The other is taken in and internalised but their difference is acknowledged and retained. The notion of a pathological melancholia is abandoned and that of an outward-looking and “externalising memory” is put into place and practised through “writing and thought.”<sup>133</sup>

In thinking, writing and speech, language also begins to reflect Barnes’s loss. He writes that “grammar, like everything else, has begun to shift; she exists not really in the present, not wholly in the past, but in some intermediate tense, the past-present.”<sup>134</sup> He relishes any previously “unreported memory” of his wife from friends, including appearances she makes in others’ dreams, as these “briefly re-anchor her in the present, and delay a little longer the inevitable slippage into the past historic.”<sup>135</sup> Barnes is left with “the final tormenting, unanswerable question” of “what is ‘success’ in mourning? Does it lie in remembering or forgetting?”<sup>136</sup> This is again resonant with Freud’s development of his theory of mourning. According to Clewell, Freud’s “early account of melancholia assumes a subject who might exist without its losses, a subject capable of repudiating attachments to lost others,” whereas his later theory imagines the possibility of an “endless mourning.”<sup>137</sup> ‘Success’ in mourning shifts from forgetting, to remembering. Barnes seems to imagine such an endless mourning, one in which the dead might remain, if not wholly in the present, then in the “past-present,” sustained through the practice of remembering.<sup>138</sup> Barnes’s writing examines death in light of a range of contemporary concerns and ideas about secularism, science and the self, but also in terms of the unique character of individual loss. His commercially successful writing on death and the dead also contributes to the presence of both in late postmodern culture. He explores how relationships between the living and the dead endure, and how they might be continually reconstituted through memory – uncertain, unreliable, subject to erosion, but in some ways potentially restorative.

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<sup>132</sup> Joan Kirkby, “‘Remembrance of the Future’: Derrida on Mourning,” *Social Semiotics* 16:3 (2006), 467, doi: 10.1080/10350330600824383

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 467.

<sup>134</sup> Barnes, *Levels*, 108.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

<sup>137</sup> Clewell, “Mourning Beyond Melancholia,” 60.

<sup>138</sup> Barnes, *Levels*, 108.

## Jenny Diski

Jenny Diski has been described as a “prolific author of fiction, memoir and essays for whom no subject was taboo.”<sup>139</sup> The author implies that by writing “candidly about her cancer diagnosis,” Diski was taking on a taboo subject.<sup>140</sup> When diagnosed in 2014, Diski “pretended for a moment” that she might not write about it.<sup>141</sup> She knew that she would, because: “writing is what I do and now cancer is what I do, too.”<sup>142</sup> She wrote her diary in the *London Review of Books*, where she was a regular contributor. Diski’s daughter explains that it was “rushed to publication” as *In Gratitude* in hardback in 2016 “so that Mum could hold a copy before she died.”<sup>143</sup> On her diagnosis Diski thought of the “monthly essays straight away” and felt they would give her “some thinking and writing to do. Enough, but not too much.”<sup>144</sup> Though for her daughter the “articles were another layer of complication during her illness. For her, it was what made it easier,” suggesting, as Barnes’s does, that writing as a process might offer a way to structure experience or to try to ‘make sense’ of death.<sup>145</sup> Diski herself never claimed to be challenging a taboo. This may be in part because the notion that death is taboo, as examined in chapter two, is rather clichéd, and “right at the start” of her diagnosis Diski “was in a funk about the avalanche of clichés” surrounding cancer.<sup>146</sup> In the doctor’s office when first given the news, she makes a joke about how “we’d better get cooking the meth.”<sup>147</sup> Later she realises that “maybe, ever since *Breaking Bad*’s first broadcast, oncologists and their nurses all over the Western world have been subjected to the meth-cooking joke” – “I was already a predicable cancer patient.”<sup>148</sup>

Any positioning of Diski’s cancer diary as one challenging a taboo around death would also fail to acknowledge the extent to which she reiterates throughout the diary that it is one of many. To some extent Diski seems to share the ‘anxiety of influence’ McHale describes as afflicting David Foster Wallace, discussed in chapter one. Diski’s queries: “can there possibly be anything new to add? Isn’t the cliché of writing a cancer diary going to be compounded by the impossibility of writing it in anything other than what has already been written, over and over?”<sup>149</sup> She points out that you

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<sup>139</sup> Kate Kelleway, “Jenny Diski Obituary,” *The Guardian*, April 28, 2016, accessed June 23, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/apr/28/jenny-diski-obituary>

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> Diski, *In Gratitude*, 11.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> “The Daughter,” in Diski, *In Gratitude*, 263.

<sup>144</sup> Diski, *In Gratitude*, 211.

<sup>145</sup> “The Daughter,” in Diski, *In Gratitude*, 259.

<sup>146</sup> Diski, *In Gratitude*, 145.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 1-2.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 12.

“don’t seek cancer diaries out, they come at you as you turn the pages of magazines and newspapers or thumb through Twitter and blogs,” suggesting they have become rather quotidian, emerging in day-to-day activities.<sup>150</sup> Ones that “stood out” did so because they were written by professional writers – Ruth Picardie and Christopher Hitchens, Tom Lubbock, Oliver Sacks and Susan Sontag (“not exactly a diary”).<sup>151</sup> Diski makes a series of poignant jokes about Clive James still being “with us” despite announcing his terminal diagnosis nearly ten years ago, before new developments in medicine offered him greater life expectancy.<sup>152</sup> She points out that it is “a delicate balance, this publicising of one’s cancer.”<sup>153</sup> For “some reason cancer is the disease of choice for public tongue-wagging.”<sup>154</sup> Cancer “has that something, that *je ne sais quoi*, not just death, but how long known beforehand: how will she die, should she choose to try for a longer life by accepting treatment, or settle for palliative care.”<sup>155</sup> As Walter has suggested, in some ways “cancer is *the* postmodern disease,” tied up with ideas about choice and public spectacle.<sup>156</sup> Diski jokingly suggests:

if it were a race, the first man home – except for Iain Banks who won the trophy by a mile – would be Oliver Sacks (announced 19 February – died 30 August), with Henning Mankell (announced 17 January – died 5 October) a close second. Lisa Jardine won a race of her own, staying silent publicly, her death a surprise except to the few who knew. So Clive James (announced May 2011 – ?) and Diski (announced 11 September 2014 – ?) still battle it out for third place.<sup>157</sup>

Despite her references to other cancer diaries, Diski’s is unique, as is each of those she cites. She writes: “I do think constantly of death, my death, the only one I’ll have.”<sup>158</sup> Anne Enright describes Diski as a writer with “an appreciation of nothing – who wants nothing, or would like to want nothing” and suggests that this is in part what makes her memoir “the best, most contradictory guide to the encroaching nothingness of death.”<sup>159</sup>

Diski, similarly to Barnes, writes that her “experience with death has been minimal and to varying degrees distant. I have never been in the presence of anyone when they died.”<sup>160</sup> Her biological parents’ deaths felt “remote in space and time.”<sup>161</sup> Then “between 2010 and early 2011

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<sup>150</sup> Ibid., 11-12.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid., 245.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid., 157.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

<sup>156</sup> Walter, *The Revival of Death*, 41.

<sup>157</sup> Diski, *In Gratitude*, 156.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid., 243.

<sup>159</sup> Anne Enright, “Foreword,” in Jenny Diski, *In Gratitude*, xv.

<sup>160</sup> Diski, *In Gratitude*, 17.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

there were two deaths: one a very elderly, long-time friend Joan Rodker, and the other, sudden and tragic, a couple of months later, my first husband, father of my daughter and oldest friend, Roger.”<sup>162</sup> In 2013, “there were two more deaths.”<sup>163</sup> These were the deaths of “Doris Lessing and her son Peter, having attachments of some complexity to each other, to my daughter and to me, going back even before I went at fifteen to live in their house.”<sup>164</sup> The title of her book is a play on words, signalling the “complaints” made about her ingratitude as a young woman, in particular her supposed lack of gratitude toward Doris Lessing, who took her in as a teenager.<sup>165</sup> Her cancer diary shifts in time between her memories of her childhood, the time she lived with Lessing, her young adulthood, and her experience of cancer. Enright describes Diski as having had an “impatience with category” and suggests that moving “between genres” was a way that she “made some sense” of her personal experience, reinforcing the idea that writing can act as a way to ‘make sense.’<sup>166</sup> Diski blends time together as comfortably as she does genre, reflecting to some extent the intractable workings of memory and the mind, and always acknowledging that everything is “more complicated than is allowed by the linear business of writing one word, one sentence, one paragraph after another with the intention of being coherent.”<sup>167</sup> According to Enright, for Diski writing “was a form of thinking. She didn’t seem to worry about the gap between her brain and the page,” though she often acknowledges there was one.<sup>168</sup> Elena Deanda considers autobiography to be “the narration of one’s life in the most primary definition” and “auto-thanato-graphy” to be “the narration of one’s own death.”<sup>169</sup> This definition marks Diski’s *In Gratitude* as particularly autothanatographical, focused as it is on both complex ideas about the self, time, loss, relationships and memory, and simultaneously her own day-to-day experiences of dying of cancer.

One of Diski’s concerns about writing a cancer diary is that she is not particularly interested in traditional autobiography. As she puts it, “narcissistic writer though I am, I have always thought of writing straight autobiography as incredibly tedious.”<sup>170</sup> This perhaps makes her disposed toward some of the qualities associated with autothanatography. She states:

I write fiction and non-fiction, but it’s almost always personal. I start with me, and often enough end with me. I’ve never been apologetic about that, or had a sense that my writing

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<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid., 228.

<sup>166</sup> Enright, “Foreword,” xi.

<sup>167</sup> Diski, *In Gratitude*, 162.

<sup>168</sup> Enright, “Foreword,” xi.

<sup>169</sup> Elena Deanda, “On Joy, Death, and Writing: From Autobiography to Autothanatography in Clarice Lispector’s works,” *Working Papers in Romance Languages* 1.1 (2006): 6.

<sup>170</sup> Diski, *In Gratitude*, 12.



is 'confessional'. What else am I going to write about but how I know and don't know the world?<sup>171</sup>

Again, Diski seems to imply that for her writing is a way of 'making sense' of the world around her. Yet Diski resents the requirement to write in a way that 'makes sense' for the reader. She explains that her

particular difficulty is that I don't like writing narrative, the getting on with what happened next of a story that has a middle, an end and a beginning. You may have noticed. Sometimes the need to tell the story, to make sense of a narrative for the reader, feels like one of those devices for rolling up an emptying toothpaste tube, so all the paste will extrude and there's no waste.<sup>172</sup>

She positions traditional stories as utilitarian, doing all of the work, and would prefer that the reader "take some responsibility," adopt a "grow-your-own narrative" approach, both ideas that can be easily associated with the characteristics of postmodernism described in chapter one.<sup>173</sup> But she suspects that readers are "after truth," which "apparently, is all inside one person's head, not shredded and scattered about, to be ordered in any way you see fit."<sup>174</sup> Diski is evidently unconvinced by the idea that truth is something a person can comprehend in any simple way and convey in writing, seeing it instead as more subjective, complicated, "shredded and scattered about," again reflecting some of the central concerns of postmodernism. Diski's writing never shies away from the complexity of trying to translate experience into writing, or from the recognition that hers is only one version of events, often moving tangentially into considering how other people might have experienced things, as she does when she imagines her oncologist's possible dismay at hearing another *Breaking Bad* joke.

Diski plays with time and imagination, exploring the ways she has "thought about death, yours, theirs, my death, all the time, now and back then."<sup>175</sup> Yet she also concedes that there is inevitably some kind of discernible or perhaps imposing pattern, as Barnes suggests, both in writing and in life, as everything is experienced as having a beginning and an end. One of the most obvious clichés Diski is keen to avoid is that of the cancer 'journey.' Yet as each round of treatment ends, she finds it more difficult to "escape the platitude" – "the phoney spiritual analogy has become inevitable" because "everything that happens for more than a split second is a 'journey'."<sup>176</sup> She writes:

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<sup>171</sup> Ibid., 10-11.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid., 145.

Can we even get dressed without a before and after, a beginning and end? Starting with your socks instead of your knickers doesn't alter the fact of the matter: undone to done. And then the reverse. One, two, buckle my shoe. It's inescapable. From one state to another, how can the journey not come to mind? That's the price of living in time.<sup>177</sup>

Diski, like many of those discussed in chapter three, positions humans as a narrating species. Yet as her own writing shows, that narrative might not be chronological or a straightforward journey but instead reflect the tangential and ungovernable movements of memory and the mind. The two central themes to be considered in Diski's *In Gratitude* are the notion of the dissolution of the self, and the importance of others.

### Dissolution

Diski, considering why the idea that she might be on a journey bothers her so much, wonders: "Why should I mind so much now? Because journeys end?"<sup>178</sup> As an atheist, Diski writes that she has "never been envious of those who believe in an afterlife until now."<sup>179</sup> She points out that when Christopher Hitchens was diagnosed with cancer people wrote to him saying "I bet you've found faith now."<sup>180</sup> Hitchens insisted he had not, and though Diski suspects that belief in an afterlife "would be so much cosier than dissolution," she cannot believe either.<sup>181</sup> She tries thinking about it: "She's gone to the next room. Nope, can't manage it. She's gone to dust and rubble. Gone nowhere. No *where* to go. No *she* to go to it."<sup>182</sup> Diski's choice of the word 'rubble,' more typically associated with buildings and debris from which human remains might be retrieved than with human remains themselves, perhaps implies an underlying conviction about the self as constructed. Her italicisations draw attention to the difficulty of describing something and somewhere beyond experiencing and beyond the experiencing subject. It is, like it is for Barnes, nothingness that presents the problem. She admits that she is "scared of dissolution" and of casting her "particles to the wind."<sup>183</sup> She is scared of "having nothing to cast my particles to the wind with, of knowing nothing when knowing everything has been the taste every day, little by little, by knowing what little meant compared to a lot, compared to something or nothing."<sup>184</sup> Knowledge and selfhood, even if they are incomplete and illusory, are how life is experienced.

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<sup>177</sup> Ibid., 145-146.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid., 146.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid., 157.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid., 157-158.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid.

Diski tell us: “people have always worried me with questions, questions have always worried me with having no answers. That’s what I mean. I don’t know enough, or know nothing.”<sup>185</sup> Diski’s writing here is opaque, particularly susceptible to multiple readings. When she writes “That’s what I mean,” it is not particularly clear what she means, presumably intentionally, because she is apprehensive about not knowing enough, or anything, including what things might mean. Diski rebukes herself for having the “arrogance to imagine that my minute fossils of knowledge are of any importance,” or for thinking that it might matter that no one will ever know the things she does or does not know, impossible as it would be to ever record all of this in writing.<sup>186</sup> Mirroring the shifting and tangential features of thought, she suddenly turns to imagining more unanswerable questions:

who is going to win the third world war? How will my grandchildren manage in a world that is daily dispersing, without a grandmother who has already dispersed? Or most simply, I’m curious. What will I not know when I’m not a knowing machine? There are too many questions for an ordinary curious mind. How can nothing be nothing? Help me out here, philosophers, there isn’t much time.<sup>187</sup>

The implication that Diski has merely “an ordinary curious mind” or that a professional philosopher might have the answers to her questions is both modest, given Diski is exceptionally well read, and comical, given the questions she is asking are unanswerable. No one knows what you will not know when you are no longer “a knowing machine,” language which itself signals Diski’s familiarity with recent scientific and psychological discourses around selfhood.

Diski writes that “to die pushing seventy years of age is no great tragedy.”<sup>188</sup> However, she also makes a joke with reference to the psychoanalytic idea of the Id, a term popularised by Freud and considered in a range of papers including the ‘The Ego and the Id.’<sup>189</sup> Most simply, the Id is the part of the self that is governed by instinctual drives, the death drive and the pleasure principle.<sup>190</sup> Diski points out that her own “id would like to know what the fuck age has got to do with being rubbed out.”<sup>191</sup> Freud wrote that “it is indeed impossible to imagine our own death,”<sup>192</sup> but Diski would “lie awake trying to imagine being dead” as a teenager, and found it “easy enough.”<sup>193</sup> Yet, she writes, she soon realised:

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<sup>185</sup> Ibid.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid., 244.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>189</sup> Sigmund Freud, “The Ego and the Id,” *Standard Edition*, 19. In a footnote on page 23 of the Standard Edition of ‘The Ego and the Id’ Freud credits the term to both Groddeck and Nietzsche, “who habitually used this grammatical term for whatever in our nature is impersonal and, so to speak, subject to natural law.”

<sup>190</sup> Ibid.

<sup>191</sup> Diski, *In Gratitude*, 5.

<sup>192</sup> Freud, “Thoughts for the times on war and death,” 289.

<sup>193</sup> Diski, *In Gratitude*, 141.

Death is the end of you. Of me. There is no being dead. The body, the coffin, the tears were for those who were still alive. Without a notion of a holiday camp heaven, something I seem never to have had, I was left with a new and special kind of endlessness, like infinity, but without you. By which I meant me. You and then not you. Me and then not...impossible sentence to finish. The prospect of extinction comes at last with an admission of the horror of being unable to imagine or be part of it, because it is beyond the you that has the capacity to think about it. I learned the meaning of being lost for words; I came up against the horizon of language.<sup>194</sup>

Diski engages here with ideas about language and the self, and the ways in which contemplating the dissolution of the self can also lead to the dissolution of language. She sometimes reassures herself with the notion that “I have been *not here* before,” been “absent, non-existent.”<sup>195</sup> She cites Beckett and Nabokov on the relationship between the nothingness before life and the nothingness after and finds “this thought, this fact” of a return to something that has already (not) been experienced to be a “genuine comfort, the only one that works, to calm me down when the panic comes.”<sup>196</sup> She tells herself: “I’ve been there. I’ve done that [...] I whisper it to myself, like a mantra, or a lullaby.”<sup>197</sup> Her reference to a lullaby is especially poignant in the context of her autobiographical account of a childhood in which a comforting and loving mother was never a feature in any straightforward sense. But as well as comfort, Diski also finds “there is a kind of excitement” at the prospect of dissolution, at

this, that I’ve never done, already done but previously, in a different form, an absolute otherness, nothingness, knowinglessness. That everyone has done, will do, world without end. The ending, and the world going on, going about its daily business. A world without me. To have known but not have any apparatus to know with. The excitement of a newness that is as old as the hills. My turn.<sup>198</sup>

Though Diski is the first to admit her writing often begins and ends with her, it is always in the context of the wider world, her experience situated alongside and in contrast to the experience of others.

## Others

Diski often relates her own life and death to ‘the bigger picture’ of humanity. She references current apocalyptic narratives and signals the climate emergency when she jokes that she “won’t need another cashmere sweater to keep me warm come the planet’s apocalypse, the ones I’ve already got will survive the moths for a couple of years or even three should it come sooner than my own

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<sup>194</sup> Ibid.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid., 149-150. Italics in original.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid., 150.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid., 211.

apocalypse.”<sup>199</sup> Her own unique apocalypse, the end of her world, is positioned in relation to the end of the world altogether. Diski also considers her privileged position compared to others, noting:

As I write this there is a world refugee crisis. I’ve never had to cope with that. That little cancer in my lung, and the growing forest of fibrotic alveoli will kill me, but something would have. Please, a real plea, not to speak to me, or anyone else, of ‘bravery’. I need to be told the story in which it doesn’t matter, a story of the millions who’ve died already. Of the millions who are to die and live in terrible conditions.<sup>200</sup>

Chapter three discusses Jameson’s view that “the more other people we recognize, even within the mind, the more peculiarly precarious becomes the status of our own hitherto unique and ‘incomparable’ consciousness or ‘self’.”<sup>201</sup> For Diski, the perspective that can be gained from the “story in which it doesn’t matter, a story of the millions who’ve died already” and “of the millions who are to die and live in terrible conditions” seems to bring some comfort, focusing attention on the other, and positioning the self as part of what might be understood as a wider pattern.<sup>202</sup>

Diski also thinks about her death from the perspective of her second husband, poet and academic Ian Patterson, referred to as the Poet in her writing. Diski suggests that “your inevitable imagined death isn’t properly a grief until you look at it from the point of view of those who will remain alive without your being in the world.”<sup>203</sup> Though thinking about the grief others will experience at your loss is “a lesson in empathy” it is also, she finds, an “indulgence in narcissism.”<sup>204</sup> She explains that “when the Poet expresses his sadness and forthcoming grief, it hits me as if I were him and suffering his loss of me,” though “I will, by then, not be suffering anything.”<sup>205</sup> She knows that “the pain and sadness that engulfs” her “at his distress is projection, a mirroring of another soul,” and wonders if it is “an exercise in the reality of love,” the only way someone can really “conceive of” their own death.<sup>206</sup> Where Freud, Barnes and Derrida all consider the internalisation of the dead other after their loss, Diski considers how the living can internalise the pain others will experience without them – mourning your own loss through the eyes of another. Diski describes “one request to the Poet from beyond the grave:”

‘I don’t much care about the funeral arrangements, but if I’m going to be buried, I want to be tucked up in a winter-tog-rated duvet. It doesn’t have to be exquisite winter snow goose down, though that would be nice. But I need a duvet. You know how much I hate being cold, and especially cold and damp.’ The Poet put his foot down. He hates waste and whimsical

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<sup>199</sup> Diski, *In Gratitude*, 6.

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.*, 209.

<sup>201</sup> Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 359.

<sup>202</sup> Diski, *In Gratitude*, 209.

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.*

dishonesty. 'You won't be there to feel the cold and damp,' he said. Tears came, just up to but not spilling over the lower lid. Mine. His. Sometimes it's hard to tell. 'I know I won't. But now. I want the promise of a duvet.' 'Double or single?'<sup>207</sup>

Diski positions the two as intertwined in grief, unsure where the borders of each other end and begin as they are forced to consider her impending absence. She implies that even before her death, she has been internalised by her husband, and he by her.

When Diski was a teenager, Sylvia Plath died. As far as Diski was concerned this death was before her time, "if only by weeks, in the same way that the end of the Second World War" was when she was born in 1947.<sup>208</sup> Though "the two events marked seminal moments" in her life, they felt "less real [...] than historical events that had taken place centuries earlier."<sup>209</sup> She suspects this was "a way of avoiding the intolerable fact that the world and the people in it got on, well or otherwise, in the years and days" before you, and that they will continue to do so after your "next and final absence."<sup>210</sup> Her concerns about the experience of the living after she dies centre around her two grandchildren. Both grandchildren feature in a picture pinned on her Twitter page, where as her daughter Chloe explains, her writing about cancer is "rawer" and more "painful to read."<sup>211</sup> She describes missing out on seeing her grandchildren grow up as "the unbearable loss. Everything else can be made sense of. The loss of the future children and grandchildren is unbearable, although quite in order, quite in the way of things."<sup>212</sup> Thinking about her two-year-old grandson, she notes that she will "be in some books and photographs and a few stories he's been told," some "hazy memory, story mixed with reality."<sup>213</sup> That is what "really distresses" her, though she feels it is "idiotic" to be "weepy about someone who has already given so much pleasure not having 'real' memories of you."<sup>214</sup> After all, "who does have real memories of their early youth? Still, the tears well."<sup>215</sup> Like Barnes, Diski is aware of the unreliability of memory and its relationship to fiction, whilst also recognising that it constitutes what is left of you for others. As her illness progresses, Diski finds herself moving around in time in a less controlled way than she does in her writing. She is "haunted by the 1950s – I'm living then, which I hardly did – until I get into bed and sleep again."<sup>216</sup> She wonders if it is "the dead haunting the living, or the living haunting the dead" as she finds she is

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<sup>207</sup> Ibid., 142-143.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid.

<sup>211</sup> "The Daughter," in Diski, *In Gratitude*, 260.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid., 239.

<sup>213</sup> Ibid., 155.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid., 212.

“always getting time wrong, looking out for my mother (to hide or seek?), finding the Poet as ignorant as I am about where to find or hide from the dead.”<sup>217</sup> The dead seem to return, though this is complicated by the profoundly difficult relationship Diski had with her parents. Diski is less sure that the dead come back to the living, as Barnes suggests, wondering instead if the living are the ones seeking out the dead.

Diski died “on the 28<sup>th</sup> of April 2016 at four thirty in the morning.”<sup>218</sup> Her pain and anxiety were managed and she “was unconscious and at home in her bed, under cashmere.”<sup>219</sup> Her daughter writes:

I was with her while she died. Her death was almost as mysterious to me as it was to her when she could think and write about it. What was she experiencing? I could only observe her body and my own feelings [...] She was hot and silky and soft, and I held her hand and lay next to her, not knowing if she knew I was there or could understand that this was the death she had been so desperate to know.<sup>220</sup>

In some ways, *In Gratitude* is about the impossibility of a relationship between the living and the dead. For those like Diski, who believe that after death there is nothing, there cannot be any ongoing relationship with the living experienced by the dead. This is the “unbearable loss” of death, that the dead will miss out on the lives of those that go on living.<sup>221</sup> Yet Diski’s cancer diary is in large part her traversing her memories of the dead, and the people in it seem very alive both to the reader and in Diski’s memory, emphasising that for the living, a relationship with the dead can be perpetuated, and might endure even if you would rather it not. Like Barnes’s, Diski’s writing explores ideas about secularism, memory and the self, but remains wholly idiosyncratic. Her emphasis on the other along with the continuation of *In Gratitude* after her death, through the inclusion of brief afterwords by her husband and daughter, both testify to the profound presence of the dead in the lives of the living. *In Gratitude* itself represents a physical presence that can, through its reading, invoke the dead.

## Will Self

Will Self also places a strong emphasis on the other in his autobiographical engagement with death, offering an explicit argument for the incorporation of the dead into society, culture and our individual lives. Self’s autobiographical engagement with death is at present more disparate than

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<sup>217</sup> Ibid.

<sup>218</sup> “The Daughter,” in Diski, *In Gratitude*, 258.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid.

<sup>221</sup> Diski, *In Gratitude*, 239.

Barnes's or Diski's and is often spoken rather than written. As such this section forms the shortest in this chapter. Self can often be found citing J.G. Ballard, who said that "for a writer death is always a career move."<sup>222</sup> At this stage in Self's own career, researching his name alongside the term death is most likely to result in a series of articles in which Self proclaims the death of the novel upon the publication of each of his own.<sup>223</sup> Katy Shaw has pointed out that as the "reigning Eeyore of British literature," Self has been repeating the idea that the novel is dead since 2000.<sup>224</sup> Like many of those cited in chapter one, Self sees postmodernism as "a retreat from the hard-edged insights of modernism."<sup>225</sup> He has tried, and failed, to distance his work from it, and his antagonism toward postmodernism seems rooted in his admiration of modernism. Self describes postmodernism as characterised by "a determination to vault over all the quicksand of the 20th century, in order to gain the seemingly safer ground provided by a cut-and-paste job on the styles and modes that antedated it."<sup>226</sup> This thesis argues that in late postmodern culture, there is ample evidence of engagement with the twentieth century, in particular in terms of its losses. Self's concern with death and the dead can itself be understood as an example of a widespread impulse to draw both the past and the dead into the present.

Death is a prominent theme in much of Self's writing, in particular his novel *How the Dead Live* (2000). This novel explores the experiences of the deceased as they live out an afterlife in Dulston, North London. Written at a time when, as chapter two argued, death was being positioned as cool, an early edition of the novel also featured Damien Hirst's *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* on the front cover. Ideas about the self are central to the novel, in which the character Lily Bloom is unable to give up an unshakable belief in her own selfhood, leading to her creating the depressing afterlife of Dulston. She is told by an Aboriginal spirit guide that "...it's all in yer head girl. None of its real. None of it at all – you, this, me, whatever [...] It's you who're no-thing. Recognise it and an' all this...this guna will evaporate."<sup>227</sup> But Lily is thoroughly attached to her own sense of self and does not "disbelieve it for a second."<sup>228</sup> Self also

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<sup>222</sup> Will Self, "Crash: Homage to JG Ballard," April 19, 2010, accessed June 23, 2020, <https://will-self.com/2010/04/19/crash-homage-to-jg-ballard/>

<sup>223</sup> Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 1.

<sup>224</sup> Katy Shaw, "Will Self: Why his report on the death of the novel is (still) premature," *The Independent*, April 20, 2018, accessed June 23, 2020, <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/will-self-report-death-novel-is-still-premature-literature-a8289716.html>

<sup>225</sup> Will Self, "Will Self On Himself," *Salon*, August 20, 2012, accessed June 23, 2020, [https://www.salon.com/2012/08/20/will\\_self\\_on\\_himself/](https://www.salon.com/2012/08/20/will_self_on_himself/)

<sup>226</sup> Will Self, "Modernism and me," *The Guardian*, August 3, 2012, accessed June 23, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/aug/03/will-self-modernism-and-me>

<sup>227</sup> Will Self, *How the Dead Live* (London: Penguin, 2000), 201.

<sup>228</sup> *Ibid.*, 202.



considers, in particular in his autobiographical texts, ideas about both the medicalisation and politics of death and dying. In 2013, he defended the right to die in an article that he later claimed caused “something of a tizzy at the BBC.”<sup>229</sup> He wrote that “this may seem rather shocking to you but I am expecting to kill myself.”<sup>230</sup> Self credits the “brilliance of contemporary medical science” with having led to a Britain in which “we’re living longer and longer, while our deaths are becoming commensurately more protracted.”<sup>231</sup> He believes “that those who feel their suffering at the end of their days is intolerable should have the self-love needed to let go of their lives.”<sup>232</sup> Self has clarified his viewpoint in a talk, pointing out that his main concern is not euthanasia, but assisted dying for those experiencing old age as opposed to, for example, only those with a terminal illness, on whom the debate currently tends to focus. Though Self also argues in support of euthanasia, his view is that “most of us will be able to kill ourselves” and “what we need is the courage to do it [...] to realise when our lives no longer have any utility, value, and when it would be better to die.”<sup>233</sup> A similar argument, though focused on those with a terminal diagnosis, was made in 2014 by former editor of the British Medical Journal Dr. Richard Smith, who argued that “dying of cancer is the best death” given it might allow time to “say goodbye, reflect on your life, leave last messages” and so on, as he too voiced concerns about “overambitious oncologists” and medical treatment that might “potentially leave us to die a much more horrible death.”<sup>234</sup> Such controversial viewpoints signal interest in beginning difficult public conversations about death.

Self has stated he is “not a theist,” but that he has “enormous respect” for how religion “deals with death” and “does death well.”<sup>235</sup> In this sense he seems to hold a similar view to Barnes, seeing religion as an effective resource for ‘making sense’ of death. Self also emphasises that “we’re mistaken if we think that we’re so secular that we have escaped the profound influence of Judeo-Christian thinking on the way that we engage with death.”<sup>236</sup> He is particularly critical of the way that, “in the secular world, the dead disappear below the waves and become irrelevant in

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<sup>229</sup> Will Self, “Let’s Talk About Death,” *The RSA*, July 30, 2014, accessed June 23, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z42t3hxDchs>

<sup>230</sup> Will Self, “A Point of View: The Biggest Decision,” *BBC Magazine*, January 13, 2013, accessed June 23, 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-20972525>

<sup>231</sup> Ibid.

<sup>232</sup> Ibid.

<sup>233</sup> Will Self, “Let’s Talk About Death,” *The RSA*, July 30, 2014, accessed June 23, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z42t3hxDchs>

<sup>234</sup> Richard Smith, “Dying of cancer is the best death,” *The BMJ Opinion*, December 31, 2014, accessed June 23, 2020, <https://blogs.bmj.com/bmj/2014/12/31/richard-smith-dying-of-cancer-is-the-best-death/>

<sup>235</sup> Will Self, “Let’s Talk About Death,” *The RSA*, July 30, 2014, accessed June 23, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z42t3hxDchs>

<sup>236</sup> Ibid.

discourse.”<sup>237</sup> He suggests there is a “rather grotesque symmetry between the evanescence of our culture, it’s obsession with what’s new and what’s up to date and what’s happening, it’s *zeitgeisty*-ness, and this refusal to acknowledge the personae of the dead.”<sup>238</sup> The inbuilt obsolescence positioned as a central tenet of late postmodern culture in chapter one is positioned here as connected to disregard for the dead. Self states:

your friend dies, your lover dies, your family member dies, and it’s kind of legitimate to talk about them for a while, and to refer to them on anniversaries, but very soon it becomes a little bit *de trop* to mention it. They have left. Life arranges itself to be concerned solely with the living.<sup>239</sup>

He advocates “considering death/life as a single phenomenon,” as a way of shifting “our cultural perspective.”<sup>240</sup> In this sense, Self’s autobiographical engagement can also be considered particularly autothanatographical, as Callus argues that autothanatography transgresses all boundaries, including “the absoluteness of the division between life and death.”<sup>241</sup> “Considering death/life as a single phenomenon,” Self argues, brings all of the dead “back into play” and “they become relevant to us again.”<sup>242</sup> He suggests that “without needing to consider them as being immortal in some other place,” it is possible that simply acknowledging the “fact of their existence” might be “helpful in dealing with loss,” echoing established and emerging theory discussed in this chapter and the next centred on maintaining bonds with the dead.<sup>243</sup> The most central theme in his less extensive but nonetheless notable autobiographical engagement with death is that of the importance of continually acknowledging the dead.

### Acknowledging the Dead

Self, like Barnes, has emphasised the genetic relationship between parents and their children. Self writes: “I turned 42 four years after my father died. Since then, with each succeeding year I feel I’ve come to know him better and better: I feel him in my habits of mind and my physical quirks. I sense him in my capacity for companionable solitude.”<sup>244</sup> Self implies that our relationships with the dead, rather than being diminished after the death of the other, might actually deepen. Self writes that when on long walks, which he used to take with his father, he remains “aware of his presence, both

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<sup>237</sup> Ibid.

<sup>238</sup> Ibid.

<sup>239</sup> Ibid. *De trop* is French for ‘not wanted’ or ‘unwelcome.’

<sup>240</sup> Ibid.

<sup>241</sup> Callus, “(Auto)thanatography or (auto)thanatology?,” 429.

<sup>242</sup> Will Self, “Let’s Talk About Death,” *The RSA*, July 30, 2014, accessed June 23, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z42t3hxDchs>

<sup>243</sup> Ibid.

<sup>244</sup> Will Self, “‘I’m aware of his presence, both within and beside me,’” *The Guardian*, June 15, 2008, accessed June 23, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/jun/15/biography.review>

within and beside” him.<sup>245</sup> He too echoes established cultural ideas that suggest the dead live on inside of those who remember them. Yet reflecting elsewhere on his mother’s death, Self suggests that it can be particularly difficult to maintain an ongoing relationship with the dead in a world that keeps on changing and, as Diski suggests, continuing on “well or otherwise,” without them.<sup>246</sup> Self writes:

My mother died in 1988 and for the decade or so after I still felt her presence quite keenly by which I mean that she spoke to me. Whether this was a real phenomenon or a psychic one was, as any bereaved person will agree, beside the point. But sometime in the late nineties I became aware that were I to encounter my mother walking along some suburban street in the clear light of day she would seem quite hopelessly out of place. Her hairstyle, the frames of her glasses, the cut of her coat, all would be anachronistic and therefore quite inadmissible in the relentlessly up to date realm of the living. She had been dead, now she was dead.<sup>247</sup>

Self does not see a person’s death as a reason to stop conversing with them. Rather, he acknowledges that conversing with the dead is commonplace. Yet he also feels a sense of the other slipping away with nothing to anchor them in the present. Though Self has continued to feel the presence of his mother, the rest of the world no longer seems as if it would be hospitable to her. Individual ways of perpetuating the presence of the dead, either involuntarily in the body or voluntarily through conversation, are contrasted with a broader culture that seems to disregard, or deny, the presence of the dead.

Critical of what he perceives as a broader cultural dismissiveness of the dead, Self questions why “our modern secular and avowedly inclusive society” has “wilfully allowed the dead to” become “gagged.”<sup>248</sup> Signalling the supposed inclusiveness of late postmodern culture, Self suggests it is surprising that “in an era when every minority is, at least in theory, listened to, we have turned our backs on the great majority and rendered them silent.”<sup>249</sup> He is keen to bring the dead back, acknowledge them, and give them the authority they are due, writing: “I don’t know about you, obviously, but the more I’ve considered the exile of the dead the more claustrophobic I’ve found the realm of the living.”<sup>250</sup> Self claims that it was “never like this in the past,” offering three causes of the marginalisation of the dead.<sup>251</sup> First, a shift away from dominant religious worldviews “that

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<sup>245</sup> Ibid.

<sup>246</sup> Diski, *In Gratitude*, 65.

<sup>247</sup> Will Self, “It’s always the others who die,” *A Point of View*, BBC Radio 4, December 8, 2013, accessed June 21, 2020, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b03k2gr3>

<sup>248</sup> Ibid.

<sup>249</sup> Ibid.

<sup>250</sup> Ibid.

<sup>251</sup> Ibid.

affirm the continuing existence of those who have died.”<sup>252</sup> Second, what might be understood as the conditions of late postmodern culture. Self believes that “in the past, the evidence of the past often had more substance than the works of the present” but that “nowadays, the world is, for the most part, replete with so much stuff, so much of which is itself ephemeral, that the ancient stones are both shrunk and stifled.”<sup>253</sup> Self implies here that the conditions associated with definitions of postmodernity, of abundance and inbuilt obsolescence, have led to the diminishment of the authority of the dead. In this sense he echoes Jameson and Anderson who, as discussed in chapter three, have both suggested that the preponderance of the living themselves have undermined the authority of both the past and the dead. Third, he cites shifting ideas about the self, combined with the emergence of new scientific knowledge. Self writes that “western philosophy” has long since been engaged in a “battle to prevent healthy scepticism from metastasising into cancerous solipsism,” but that now “each day we have to become our own little God,” emphasising the primacy of the self in late postmodern culture.<sup>254</sup> Like Barnes, he points out the limits of scientific knowledge and of secularism when it comes to contemplating your place in the universe, waging that “even the greatest living atheist Richard Dawkins doesn’t survey his breakfast table each morning and feel that all’s right with the rice crispies because they’ve been brought into being by the highly complex interaction of insensate and ultimately purposeless processes.”<sup>255</sup> For Self, “the dead can have no place in Dawkins’s world,” with science and secularism having led to a highly inhospitable environment for the dead.<sup>256</sup>

Self wonders whether, having “purged” the dead “on the basis they can furnish no proof of their existence,” we might “undermine the capacity of that which they have left behind to also speak to us.”<sup>257</sup> In some ways, Self’s perspective can be easily challenged. He underplays the evident continued cultural prominence of and interest in what the dead have left behind, in terms of a wide range of literature, music, art, material culture and human remains, for example. He does not consider the popularity of historical biographies or of fantasy premised on the past, or engagement with writing about death by the now deceased. Nor does he acknowledge the ways in which death and the dead are themselves central to the “superabundance” of contemporary culture, as examined in chapter two.<sup>258</sup> Penfold-Mounce’s argument that the dead have become a “valuable

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<sup>252</sup> Ibid.

<sup>253</sup> Ibid.

<sup>254</sup> Ibid.

<sup>255</sup> Ibid.

<sup>256</sup> Ibid.

<sup>257</sup> Ibid.

<sup>258</sup> Ibid.

commodity,” continuing to “wield agency to the extent that they can speak and keep working after death” also illustrates that there are limits to Self’s argument that the dead are disregarded, or that their voice is no longer heard.<sup>259</sup> In many ways, the dead do seem to speak. This can be seen on an individual level, as exemplified by Barnes and Self who talk to their dead loved ones, and by those cited at the very beginning of this thesis who continue to converse with the dead. It can be seen on a cultural level through the literary trope of prosopopoeia, through televisual representations of the articulate dead discussed in the next chapter, in popular culture more broadly, in the discovery of mass unmarked graves that allow the dead to “insist on a hearing” considered by Roy and mentioned in chapter one,<sup>260</sup> and in the range of ways described by Kearl and noted in chapters two and three, including through technological innovations and memorials.<sup>261</sup>

However, Self, though he is using his public profile to engender conversations about death and the dead, is evidently concerned with the devaluing of their position in both culture and society more broadly. He suggests that if the dead have no agency in the world, then nor do the living, as a disregard for the dead makes life a hollow act, itself too ephemeral to have much value if that value is only tied to a physical, living presence. Self obliquely references Shakespeare (“all the world’s a stage”) and suggests that ignoring the dead in the story of life will inevitably have consequences for the living. He tells us that “if from time to time someone quits the stage upon which we all strut and fret” then “we miss them and we remember them,” but we acknowledge “that mourning is also part of this long running performance that we call life.”<sup>262</sup> He emphasises here ideas about the self and life as narrative. Death forms a part of “the script we were all handed when the curtain went up” yet “unless we’re excessively morbid or mentally ill we don’t tend to address the dead in the second person.”<sup>263</sup> If life is a performance, but the dead “aren’t even in the wings” and are not going to “come back on,” then they are “no longer relevant.”<sup>264</sup> Their, and sooner or later our, absence serve as a reminder of the “hollowness of our own act.”<sup>265</sup> The living can reassure themselves only with the knowledge that “it’s always the others who die.”<sup>266</sup> There is an evident current of anxiety in Self’s metaphor of performance, but also the more promising implication that giving the dead their due would enhance the lives and prospects of the living, who might be reassured that their own lives

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<sup>259</sup> Penfold-Mounce, *Death, the Dead and Popular Culture*, 36.

<sup>260</sup> Roy, *Capitalism*, 65.

<sup>261</sup> Kearl, “The Proliferation of Postselves,” 52.

<sup>262</sup> Will Self, “It’s always the others who die,” *A Point of View*, BBC Radio 4, December 8, 2013, accessed June 21, 2020, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b03k2gr3>

<sup>263</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>264</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>265</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>266</sup> *Ibid.*

would be reaffirmed after their death. Self also reinforces here the notion at the core of the contradiction of autothanatography, in that if you cannot experience your own dying, or your own being dead, then it is always the other who dies. Self advocates, rather than seeing death as the end of the performance of life, “considering death/life as a single phenomenon,” challenging clear divisions between life and death and eroding constructed boundaries between the living and the dead.<sup>267</sup> The dead should be acknowledged and their presence perpetuated, not in the sense of a theistic afterlife, but as a part of all of life, even if that means a very crowded stage.

## Conclusion

This chapter has examined examples of what can be understood as autothanatography by three different writers in the context of what this thesis has defined as late postmodern culture. Autothanatography is positioned here as highly self-aware autobiographical engagement explicitly concerned with death, the dead and the impossibilities of the autobiographical project. For de Man, the autobiographical element of all writing extends to the reader, and each of the texts under discussion here can be understood to provoke an “autobiographical moment,” prompting the reader or listener to engage with death and, most explicitly in Diski’s case, with the dead.<sup>268</sup> As Marriott suggests, and as cited at the very opening of this thesis, engaging with the writing of the dead can be a way of developing a relationship with them, even if you never met them when they were alive.<sup>269</sup> The texts discussed here are idiosyncratic, as unique as the selves who produced them might be felt to be. At the same time, they are not isolated examples of engagement with death and dying. As Diski emphasises, there have been many cancer diaries in books, magazines and online in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Small notes the rise in autobiographical writing about death and dying associated with postmodernism’s favouring of individual narratives since the 1990s, and points out that those narratives now “proliferate.”<sup>270</sup> All of the texts examined here engage explicitly with death and the dead and bring into focus what this thesis argues is a widespread and evident concern with them in late postmodern culture. Whilst engaging with the texts examined here might offer opportunities to think about and ‘make sense’ of death for readers, Barnes and Diski also suggest that the act of writing can offer opportunities to build or rebuild patterns of meaning for the authors themselves. In their idiosyncrasies each of these writers negotiates a range of different views about grief, loss, death and the dead, many of which resonate and merge with

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<sup>267</sup> Will Self, “Let’s Talk About Death,” *The RSA*, July 30, 2014, accessed June 23, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z42t3hxDchs>

<sup>268</sup> De Man, “Autobiography as De-facement,” 921.

<sup>269</sup> Marriott, “‘Just because you are dead.’”

<sup>270</sup> Small, “Death of the Authors,” 224.

others identifiable in theoretical, scientific, literary and artistic texts in the present moment. Though Barnes and Self both see their own concern with death and the dead as 'against the grain' of a broader social and cultural denial, this thesis argues that the texts examined in this chapter, with their emphasis on the self and their explicit interest in death and the dead, are emblematic of a broader interest in engaging with these themes in late postmodern culture, and of the ways in which late postmodern culture can be hospitable to such engagement. The next chapter will consider how the dead are resurrected in late postmodern culture, in particular via photography, film and television, and will offer an analysis of three televisual narratives that bring back the dead.

## Chapter Five: Resurrecting the Dead in Late Postmodern Culture

*All your buried corpses now begin to speak.*

James Baldwin<sup>1</sup>

According to Fuss, whose writing on prosopopoeia in poetry was discussed in chapter two, “where the cultural work of reanimation is concerned, poetry has become in the past two hundred years a dead medium, superseded and displaced by far more powerful technologies of resurrection.”<sup>2</sup> She gives the examples of “sound and sight technologies like the photograph, gramophone, telephone, radio, and film,” all of which can “legitimately claim to revive the dead more effectively than the poem.”<sup>3</sup> As this chapter will go on to discuss, television might be deemed a particularly apposite home for the dead in late postmodern culture. However, in line with the positioning of this thesis in relation to postmodernism, famous for its disregard for established hierarchies, no attempt is made here to create a hierarchy of media in terms of their capacity to extend hospitality to the dead. André Bazin has suggested that “if the plastic arts were put under psychoanalysis, the practice of embalming the dead might turn out to be a fundamental factor in their creation,” and the same could be said of a range of other media, all with the capacity to sustain the presence of the dead and bring them back in different ways.<sup>4</sup> Television is one more place where people can ‘make sense’ of death and engage with the dead in a context where the return of the dead in popular culture and beyond has become both widespread and significant. The chapter begins by considering the prominence of the return of the dead in contemporary culture and introduces the term hauntology, before considering the role of visual technologies in facilitating engagement with death and the dead. It then presents the analysis of three televisual narratives that respond to a question posed by Alfred Hitchcock in an interview with François Truffaut. Namely, “If the dead were to come back, what would you do with them?”<sup>5</sup> These are the French television *Les Revenants* (2012-2015), British series *In the Flesh* (2013-2014) and British series *The Fades* (2011).<sup>6</sup> The chapter considers one prominent theme in each of the three television series, followed by one overarching theme that emerges in them all – that of hospitality toward the dead.

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<sup>1</sup>James Baldwin in 1968 reflecting on the long and bloody history of the US. James Baldwin, ‘The Dick Cavett Show – 1968,’ in *I Am Not Your Negro*, ed. Raoul Peck (London: Penguin, 2017), 81.

<sup>2</sup> Fuss, *Dying Modern*, 29.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>4</sup> André Bazin, “The ontology of the photographic image,” trans. Hugh Gray, *Film Quarterly* 13.4 (1960), 4, doi: 10.2307/1210183

<sup>5</sup> Alfred Hitchcock in François Truffaut, *Hitchcock* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1985), 309.

<sup>6</sup> *Les Revenants*, created by Fabrice Gobert, Haut et Court, 2012-2015, Television Series; *In the Flesh*, created by Dominic Mitchell, BBC Three, 2013-2014, Television Series; *The Fades*, created by Jack Thorne, BBC Three, 2011, Television Series.



## The return of the dead

As discussed in chapter two, a key criticism of the death denial thesis as it has continued to carry weight into the twenty-first century is that the dead are, in many ways, all around us. The dead, as Penfold-Mounce has made clear, “are ever-present and far from being denied, repressed or a societal taboo.”<sup>7</sup> Žižek has suggested that the last decade of the twentieth century saw the return of the dead become the “fundamental fantasy of contemporary mass culture,” emphasising their return in film, television, novels and videogames.<sup>8</sup> He asks what he describes as the “naïve and elementary question: why do the dead return?”<sup>9</sup> Žižek finds his answer in Lacanian psychoanalysis and suggests that they return to collect an “unpaid symbolic debt” and because they were “*not properly buried*.”<sup>10</sup> As Davis points out, beliefs about the return of the dead as either a consequence of improper burial or of the failure to enact specified rites and rituals have a long legacy. Davis reinforces Žižek’s belief that the appearance of a ghost is “the sign of a disturbance in the symbolic, moral and epistemological order” and argues that, as per the archetypal ghost story, the dead return in popular culture because something remains unresolved.<sup>11</sup> This thesis, however, argues that the dead also return because, under the conditions of what is defined here as late postmodern culture, a hospitable environment has been created for them.

In late postmodern culture, the dead return not only because they have something unresolved to address, but because their return is beneficial and profitable to the living. As Penfold-Mounce has argued, “in a mass-mediated, technology-driven global world, a remarkable situation has occurred, whereby the dead no longer remain silent as the grave.”<sup>12</sup> These are not the fictional dead of ghosts stories and the horror genre, but dead celebrities, put to work after their death and even “performing and producing ‘new’ products” using “audio and visual technologies,” despite never having consented to their use in this way.<sup>13</sup> They also return because imperatives to listen to voices of those long marginalised and oppressed and to address the injustices of the past, in particular the twentieth century, are a staple of late postmodern culture. As James Baldwin predicted in 1968, in the last decades of the twentieth century and the early twenty-first, all of the

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<sup>7</sup> Penfold-Mounce, *Death, the Dead and Popular Culture*, 3.

<sup>8</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Lacan through popular culture* (Amherst, MA: Massachusetts University Press, 1991), 22.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* Italics in original.

<sup>11</sup> Colin Davis, *Haunted Subjects: Deconstruction, Psychoanalysis and the Return of the Dead* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), 2.

<sup>12</sup> Penfold-Mounce, *Death, the Dead and Popular Culture*, 36.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 10-11.

“buried corpses” of past atrocities would “now begin to speak.”<sup>14</sup> Roy, cited in chapter one, has suggested that in the era of acknowledging a climate emergency, “it will not just be dead humans, it will be the dead land, dead rivers, dead mountains, and dead creatures in dead forests that will insist on a hearing.”<sup>15</sup> Here, there is evidently a pattern of returning for justice, for reparations and for recognition, as the living are to be held responsible for and to the dead.

According to Kearl, in the “new market-driven and media-saturated culture, even revisionist biographical memories and infamy can be preferable to being forgotten.”<sup>16</sup> This relates to the ideas discussed in chapter three, where it is argued that for a wide range of reasons, the individual self has taken on a new primacy. Davis also connects what chapter three argues is the primacy of the self to the return of the dead. He suggests that “the function of ghost stories seems in part to be to reassure us that there is something outside ourselves, some sense or order that surpasses us even as it remains impenetrable to us,” something to reassure us that “we are not alone, and the truth is, as the *X-Files* insists, ‘out there’ rather than locked within ourselves.”<sup>17</sup> In this sense the primacy of the self is a lonely, potentially fear-inducing and alienating experience. For Davis, rather than a consequence of the confluence of capitalism and postmodernism as this thesis argues, postmodernism alone accounts for so many “recent appearances of the dead and the undead,” which he suggests “correspond to a need to engineer for ourselves more comfortable conditions after the fluid values of postmodernity,” as they sought to destabilise any metanarrative that might be found outside the self.<sup>18</sup> In this sense, profit, opportunity, individualism and the wider conditions of postmodernity seem as important to the dead’s return as the paying of a symbolic debt, or what Davis calls the “‘unfinished business’ model,” evident in in ghost stories, film, and often in “psychoanalytic theories of mourning and melancholia.”<sup>19</sup>

Certainly, theories of mourning and loss can shed further light on the rampant return of the dead. Leader points out that “when someone dies, we often behave as if they are not entirely dead,” detailing a range of burial rites and rituals that have been utilised to ensure the dead do not come back.<sup>20</sup> He also suggests that the “animism ascribed to the dead” in culture, where the dead return as vampires, zombies, ghosts and more, “is yet one more sign that at some level we believe that the

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<sup>14</sup> Baldwin, *I Am Not Your Negro*, 81.

<sup>15</sup> Roy, *Capitalism*, 65.

<sup>16</sup> Kearl, “The Proliferation of Postselves,” 62.

<sup>17</sup> Davis, *Haunted Subjects*, 156.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>20</sup> Leader, *The New Black*, 114-115.

dead are always about to come back.”<sup>21</sup> He writes that “to stop this, the undead need to die,” and points out that “killing the dead is central” not just to stories of the undead, but to other aspects of popular culture.<sup>22</sup> Even when the narrative is not a horror or science fiction one, “today’s bad guys will invariably get shot, stabbed, burned, drowned, or thrown from some great height, yet this first ‘death’ does not kill them.”<sup>23</sup> Leader suggests that “rather than seeing this as a cheap ploy to excite suspense” we should “recognize the basic mechanism of laying to rest: for the living to feel safe and secure, the dead have to die twice.”<sup>24</sup> He cites anthropological research, religious examples, and the dreams of patients (he is an analyst) who have imagined killing their dead loved ones. Because killing the dead in a dream represents “a movement from empirical biological death to symbolic laying to rest,” it tends “to be a positive sign in the mourning process” for his patients.<sup>25</sup> Leader points out that loss is often complicated when, “isolated from their usual infrastructure and kept alive by a variety of technological and pharmaceutical means, the sick person dies symbolically before their body actually gives up the ghost.”<sup>26</sup> For Leader, “killing the dead is an essential aspect of mourning” that is both complicated by the conditions of late postmodernity, and a trope highly prevalent within its culture.<sup>27</sup>

Though Dylan Thomas famously wrote that “after the first death, there is no other,” a pattern of two deaths is visible in a host of popular culture narratives in which the first death is positioned as somehow improper or incomplete.<sup>28</sup> According to Davis, “the covert imperative” behind “nearly all” of the narratives of “the dead and the undead” around us is that of “consigning the deceased to their second death.”<sup>29</sup> As this chapter will go on to show, this has been complicated in recent years by the emergence of a range of narratives across different media that seek to, rather than put the dead to rest, live with them. As raised in chapter four, “killing the dead again is precisely what Derrida wanted to avoid.”<sup>30</sup> Derrida’s “anxious desire to find in their legacy a potential for renewed exchange” and for the dead to retain their alterity led him to reconsider, redress and counter psychoanalytic theories that positioned a second symbolic death as necessary.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 115-116.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 117.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>28</sup> Dylan Thomas, “A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London,” *Dylan Thomas: Selected Poems*, ed. Walford Davies (London: Phoenix, 2004), 62.

<sup>29</sup> Davis, *Haunted Subjects*, 154.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

In *Specters of Marx* (1994) Derrida writes that we must learn to “live *with* ghosts, in the upkeep, the conversation, the company, or the companionship, in the commerce without commerce of ghosts. To live otherwise, and better. No, not better, but more justly. But with *them*.”<sup>32</sup> Derrida seeks to depathologise mourning, seeing it as “the opportunity for a continuing engagement with the legacy of the dead who remain within us and yet beyond us.”<sup>33</sup> Derrida’s demand that we live with the dead and continue our engagement with them is, as this thesis argues, now being responded to from a range of cultural coordinates.

In some ways Derrida’s perspectives on grief and loss have much in common with the concept of continuing bonds put forward by Klass, Silverman and Nickman, which emphasises that “interactive” relationships can continue between the living and the dead.<sup>34</sup> The lack of dialogue between these concepts is an indication of the ways in which the tensions and antagonisms between deconstruction and, for example, psychology, can be disciplinary, rather than intellectual. The theory of continuing bonds shares a great deal of ground with Derrida’s ideas about grief conceptually, but the sympathies and fault lines between them seem not to have garnered attention. The emergence of and current concern with theories that emphasise continued engagement with the dead and active relationships with them across disciplines, however, supports the argument that there is a widespread impetus to engage with death and the dead in the present moment, or what this thesis has defined as late postmodern culture. These theoretical understandings of death and grief also emerge, as this chapter will examine, in what Judith Butler calls “cultural appropriations.”<sup>35</sup> Blanco and Peeren have pointed out that recently the “traditional tendency to exorcise ghosts and lay them to rest,” or at least to try to do so, has been replaced by an “effort to,” as Derrida instructs, “live *with* ghosts.”<sup>36</sup> This can be seen in a range of different ways, including in fiction, film and televisual narratives that portray the dead as having typical everyday concerns. This is perhaps best exemplified in the British BBC drama *Being Human* (2008-2013), which focuses on the lives of a ghost, vampire and werewolf “desperately trying to balance their paranormal problems with the challenge of simply Being Human,” and the 2014 New Zealand mockumentary about vampire

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<sup>32</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), xviii.

<sup>33</sup> Kirkby, “‘Remembrance of the Future’: Derrida on Mourning,” 461.

<sup>34</sup> Phyllis R. Silverman and Steven L. Nickman, “Concluding Thoughts,” in *Continuing Bonds*, 349.

<sup>35</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, ix-x.

<sup>36</sup> María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren, “Introduction,” in *Popular Ghosts: The Haunted Spaces of Everyday Culture*, eds. María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren (London: Continuum, 2010), xiv. Italics in original.

housemates titled *What We Do in the Shadows*, now adapted as a television series by FX.<sup>3738</sup> The imperative to live with ghosts put forward by Derrida has been conceptualised as part of what has come to be termed ‘hauntology.’

## Hauntology

Hauntology is one way of ‘making sense’ of the frequent return of the dead in contemporary culture that has been relatively fruitful in crossing disciplinary boundaries. Hauntology, according to Shaw, is a “critical practice” that “turns to the past in order to make sense of the present.”<sup>39</sup> The term is put forward first by Derrida in *Specters of Marx* and “supplants its near-homonym ontology, replacing the priority of being and presence with the figure of the ghost as that which is neither present nor absent, neither dead nor alive.”<sup>40</sup> Harper has pointed out that hauntology as a concept has much in common with Derrida’s “general methodology of deconstruction,” in which “metaphors, spectres, being neither one thing or the other” and challenges to “basic binary oppositions like ‘alive / dead’, ‘present / absent’ and past / present” are central.<sup>41</sup> Hauntology has been most prevalent in the study of English literature. However, it has now also been engaged with more broadly both within and outside of academia because of the ways in which, as Shaw notes, “popular culture has been inundated with representations of those who occupy a space between being and non-being, who defy ontological criteria.”<sup>42</sup> The way in which the concept has stepped outside of academia can be seen in the BBC Ideas video titled “What is hauntology? And why is it all around us?” posted on 1 March 2019, which has garnered over 60 thousand views.<sup>43</sup> As this chapter will go on to discuss, the dead in the three televisual narratives examined here can certainly be said to defy ontological criteria, complicating and blurring boundaries between dead and alive as well as established categories of the undead.

Hauntology has also been related to postmodernism and, according to Shaw, “emerges” from *Specters of Marx* whilst drawing on “contextual developments in postmodernism and a wider

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<sup>37</sup> BBC, “About Being Human,” accessed July 8, 2019, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/3HYZgyrgKfYJq2lbQ40Lj04/about-being-human>

<sup>38</sup> *Being Human*, created by Toby Whithouse, BBC Three, 2008-2013, Television Series; *What We Do in the Shadows*, dir. Jemaine Clement and Taika Waititi, Madman Entertainment, 2014, Feature Film; *What We Do in the Shadows*, created by Jemaine Clement, FX, 2019-present, Television Series.

<sup>39</sup> Katy Shaw, *Hauntology: The presence of the past in Twenty-First Century English Literature* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018), 3.

<sup>40</sup> Davis, *Haunted Subjects*, 9.

<sup>41</sup> Adam Harper, “Hauntology: The Past Inside the Present,” October 27, 2009, accessed June 23, 2020, <http://rougesfoam.blogspot.com/2009/10/hauntology-past-inside-present.html>

<sup>42</sup> Shaw, *Hauntology*, 3.

<sup>43</sup> BBC, “What is hauntology? And why is it all around us?,” March 1, 2019, accessed June 23, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/ideas/videos/what-is-hauntology-and-why-is-it-all-around-us/p0729knv>

rejection of metanarratives.”<sup>44</sup> It is a “concept capable of presenting new ways of thinking about the past, present and future, rather than just the ‘end’ of history and of the twentieth century,” a perspective which, as discussed in chapter one and pointed out throughout this thesis has tended to dominate in recent decades.<sup>45</sup> According to Shaw “by the new millennium, hauntology had become part of the *zeitgeist* of academic and popular criticism” as a way to analyse a culture “seemingly more concerned with co-opting the past than embracing the future.”<sup>46</sup> A concern with the co-option of the past also connects hauntology to postmodernism, with the latter’s tendency toward pastiche and general borrowing from the past having penetrated so much of contemporary culture. Fisher, whose conception of capitalist realism is central to the definition of late postmodern culture presented here, connects hauntology with postmodernism via Jameson. He associates hauntology with “the deterioration of a whole mode of social imagination: the capacity to conceive of a world radically different from the one in which we currently live” – for example, as discussed in chapter one, the possibility of imagining any alternative to capitalism.<sup>47</sup> The nostalgia that Jameson positions as central to postmodernism has become so commonplace that it has “ceased to be worthy of comment” and is “no longer even noticed” in a culture “oppressed by a crushing sense of finitude and exhaustion.”<sup>48</sup> Fisher uses the example of popular music to illustrate his point, emphasising the way in which the styles of the twentieth century now dominate, as “cultural time has folded back on itself.”<sup>49</sup> The confusion of time is central both to postmodernism as defined by Jameson and to Derrida’s conception of hauntology, with the epigraph to *Specters of Marx* being a phrase from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*: “this time is out of joint.”<sup>50</sup> The disruption of a sense of linear time is central to the current moment and is arguably another reason for the ease with which the dead now seem to return. As the past comes into the present, so do the dead that lived there.

Though hauntology is primarily focused on ghosts its critical insights can also be applied to other liminal figures. One particularly interesting element of hauntology is its adoption of post-Freudian theories of grief to consider how the dead can haunt the living from within. Abraham and Torok’s notion of a ‘healthy’ incorporation of the dead versus a ‘pathological’ introjection is central here. In pathological ‘introjection,’ the deceased is interred within the self as a “full-fledged person,” leading to a “separate and concealed existence” in which the “ghost of the crypt comes back to

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<sup>44</sup> Shaw, *Hauntology*, 5.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>47</sup> Mark Fisher, “What is Hauntology?,” *Film Quarterly* 66.1 (2012): 16.

<sup>48</sup> Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life*, 6, 8.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>50</sup> William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, edited by Harold Jenkins (Walton on Thames: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1997), 228.

haunt.”<sup>51</sup> Abraham and Torok’s ideas about haunting, and in particular intergenerational haunting, have informed much hauntological analysis, but can also be seen to emerge in cultural appropriations, whether directly informed by readings of the theory or whether coincident with its current popularity. As Butler has pointed out, popular culture can be a “new venue for theory, necessarily impure, where it emerges in and as the very event of cultural translation.”<sup>52</sup> One particularly explicit example can be found in the short-lived television series *Intruders* (2014) in which the dead of past generations haunt the living from within, taking over the bodies of the living, suppressing their previous occupiers and ‘trading places’ with them.<sup>53</sup> The living in this series are not possessed by demons or turned into monsters but supplanted by the dead who live inside of them. Cultural texts such as these emphasise the ways in which the return of the dead in popular culture can be myriad, not limited to ghosts, zombies or vampires. The dead emerge in a range of complex and peculiar ways, often in texts centrally concerned with ideas about grief, loss and responsibility.

For Derrida, responsibility and the notion of hospitality are central to hauntology and to his ideas about death and mourning. As discussed in chapter four, Derrida demonstrates significant concern with what it is to mourn ethically and how to internalise the dead in a way that respects and embraces their alterity. Derrida also emphasises that the principle of hospitality, which would need to be extended toward the dead in order to ‘live with’ them, is one of “hospitality without reserve,” acknowledging the risks and discomfort of such a hospitality.<sup>54</sup> As this chapter will discuss in relation to three televisual narratives, hospitality is a fraught and complex matter. Just because the dead seem to be everywhere, it does not mean that they are respected or listened to, or that their otherness is left intact. Shaw has suggested that the present popularity of ghosts “paradoxically makes specters seem prominent and familiar, yet also harder to ‘see’ than ever before.”<sup>55</sup> When the dead are made “hyper-visible through the commercialization of ghosts as big business, and the popularity of haunting in tourist and heritage sites, contemporary culture undermines the unsettling effect of the specter by its incorporation into the aesthetic of the everyday.”<sup>56</sup> When haunting becomes an everyday phenomenon, “our over-familiarity with the spectral in contemporary culture can desensitize the significance of their return and distract us from the relevance of the messages

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<sup>51</sup> Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 130-131.

<sup>52</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, ix-x.

<sup>53</sup> *Intruders*, written and developed by Glen Morgan, BBC America, 2014, Television Series.

<sup>54</sup> Jacques Derrida, “The Principle of Hospitality,” *Parallax* 11:1 (2005): 6, doi: 10.1080/1353464052000321056

<sup>55</sup> Shaw, *Hauntology*, 106.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

specters bring to the post-millennial world.”<sup>57</sup> Whereas Self wonders whether, having “purged” the dead “on the basis they can furnish no proof of their existence,” we might “undermine the capacity of that which they have left behind to also speak to us,” Shaw is concerned that their abundance is what has undermined their capacity to be heard.<sup>58</sup> Hauntology is not simply concerned with why the dead return, but, as Shaw explains, “how we are living with them,” and with the ethics of living with them.<sup>59</sup> Where hauntology has been primarily utilised in the study of English literature, it is also highly pertinent to the study of visual texts that resurrect the dead.

### **The dead in photography, film and television**

Myriad relationships between visual technologies, death and the dead have been established. Photography seems to have been understood since its inception as a way to capture the past and resurrect the dead. Eduardo Cadava writes: “photography is a mode of bereavement” that “acknowledges what takes place in any photograph – the return of the departed.”<sup>60</sup> Davies has explained how photography provided “the possibility of direct representation of the dead,” as the stillness of the photographic image “gave way to an immediacy of death.”<sup>61</sup> As technologies developed, “video and film” made the dead “more dynamic.”<sup>62</sup> Susan Sontag positions photography as testifying to “the innocence, the vulnerability of lives heading toward their own destruction [...] this link between photography and death haunts all photographs of people.”<sup>63</sup> For Roland Barthes, “the return of the dead” is “that rather terrible thing which is there in every photograph.”<sup>64</sup> Each image, in an attempt to preserve a moment in time, represents a dead moment, signalling both the passing of time and the inevitable death of anyone photographed. Barthes can also be understood to position the return of the dead in photography in relation to the central tenets of the death denial thesis. He suggests that as death and the dead receded from daily experience in the twentieth century, photography offered a new space in which they might emerge. He writes: “death, in a society, has to be somewhere,” and that “if it is no longer (or less than it was) in the religious domain, it must be elsewhere; perhaps in this image which produces Death while trying to preserve life.”<sup>65</sup> Barthes suggests that death was relocated, rather than denied, in the twentieth century. Giles

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Will Self, “It’s always the others who die,” *A Point of View*, BBC Radio 4, December 8, 2013, accessed June 21, 2020, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b03k2gr3>

<sup>59</sup> Shaw, *Hauntology*, 3.

<sup>60</sup> Eduardo Cadava, *Words of Light: Theses on the Photography of History* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997), 11.

<sup>61</sup> Davies, *A Brief History of Death*, 100.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>63</sup> Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (London: Penguin, 1979), 70.

<sup>64</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Vintage, 2000), 9.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 92.



Fraser argues that photography has become “terribly, terribly important” in recent years because “people no longer believe in eternity and they want to capture a bit of time and hold it fast and keep it forever.”<sup>66</sup> He suggests that people take their own photographs as a way of saying “here I am and I will be forever,” implying that photography is also connected to the primacy of the self in contemporary culture.<sup>67</sup>

Davis, reflecting on Barthes’s suggestion that death and the dead might have shifted into photography from elsewhere, points out that in the twenty-first century, the “prevalence of the returning dead on television, and in film and literature may mean that other media have at least as significant a role to play in the evolving displacement of our ambivalent desires to cling on to and rid ourselves of the dead.”<sup>68</sup> Davis suggests that cultural representations of death and the dead are more likely attempts at displacement than the active engagement that this thesis argues they are. Yet he also acknowledges a significant level of ambivalence present in the treatment of death and the dead in contemporary culture. Furthermore, he implies, with his reference to “other media,” that a range of new media are now embroiled in sustaining the presence of the dead. Though no particular medium is positioned here as superior in its capacity to reanimate the dead or offer space for engagement with death, there is no doubt that as new digital technologies have led to the endurance of so many media in online spaces – of the still and moving image, of the written word, music and multimodal texts – they have in turn contributed to the proliferation of the dead in late postmodern culture. Wurth and van de Ven have suggested that “survival, living on, appears to have become the existential mode of the digital age, in so far as digital technology makes every loss potentially a virtual loss, and may render erasure provisional.”<sup>69</sup> Their view echoes that of Fisher, who notes that “digital recall” has meant that “loss is itself lost,”<sup>70</sup> and those of Blanco and Peeren, who have written that digital culture more broadly has its own “ghostly entropy.”<sup>71</sup> As the everyday has become more ghostly, they suggest, so the “the ghostly has become everyday.”<sup>72</sup> Whereas chapter one argued that the inbuilt obsolescence characterising so much of contemporary capitalism is one of the ways in which death has been built into the structures of late postmodern culture, so the dead are also built into its structures in terms of the abiding digital traces they leave behind,

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<sup>66</sup> Giles Fraser, “Selfie Culture,” *Moral Maze*, 39:40, December 12, 2015, accessed June 23, 2020, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b06r81v7>

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Davis, *Haunted Subjects*, 155.

<sup>69</sup> Wurth and van de Ven, “Posthumously Speaking,” 49.

<sup>70</sup> Fisher, *Ghosts of my Life*, 2.

<sup>71</sup> Blanco and Peeren, “Introduction,” xiii.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., xiv.

such as Jenny Diski's Twitter account mentioned in chapter four. New technologies combine with older ones to produce spaces and media that can accommodate, and are hospitable to, the dead.

Laura Mulvey examines how the development of visual technologies led to the accumulation of images of the dead in terms of cinema, writing that it has been "affected by the natural mortality of the human figures whose existences it unnaturally preserved."<sup>73</sup> The ghosts of those recorded, from dead stars to the "fleeting extra," are now, she argues, crowding around cinema as its "own life lies in question."<sup>74</sup> Mulvey is referring in particular to the impact of new digital technologies, which she suggests are, though not necessarily deleterious, fundamentally altering in terms of the production and consumption of film. Pronouncements of the death of cinema are, to some extent, merely more evidence of the narrative of the end-of-everything so prevalent in late postmodern culture. According to John Belton, predictions of cinema's demise have been "with us as long as the cinema itself," adding another layer of depth and complexity to associations between death and the moving image.<sup>75</sup> A discourse of decline has so permeated the history of cinema that Oliver Lyttleton has curated a chronological potted list of pronouncements that, though they do not date back quite so far as those Belton identifies, begin with statements announcing the death of cinema in the 1940s.<sup>76</sup> Beliefs about film's capacity to bring back the dead are equally long established. Robert Smith outlined how early viewers of film were "amazed and moved" by its capacity to dispense the "miraculous gift" of "reanimating what had gone."<sup>77</sup> Photography and film both offer the illusory restoration of the past – of people and moments thought to be gone forever.

Mulvey argues that the relationship between death and cinema has been "intensified" by the "new ease with which the cinema can be delayed."<sup>78</sup> She describes the transition from the still image of photography to the moving image of film, followed by the return to stillness made possible in digital formats. She argues that "the easily accessible freeze frame brings the presence of death back to the ageing cinema," unearthing what is "buried in the cinema's materiality," namely a "reminder of the difficulty of understanding passing time and, ultimately, of understanding death."<sup>79</sup> If photography brought the return of the dead and film animated them then gave them a voice, with

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<sup>73</sup> Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), 17.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> John Belton, "If film is dead, what is cinema?," *Screen* 55:4 (2014), 460, doi: [10.1093/screen/hju037](https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/hju037)

<sup>76</sup> Oliver Lyttleton, "Sound the death knell (again): a brief history of the death of cinema," October 2, 2012, accessed June 23, 2020, <http://blogs.indiewire.com/theplaylist/a-brief-history-of-the-death-of-cinema-100112>

<sup>77</sup> Robert Smith, "Deconstruction and Film," in *Deconstructions: A user's guide*, 121.

<sup>78</sup> Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second*, 32.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 31.

the development of digital technologies, the power and presence of death is reasserted in the accessibility of the “the stillness of photography.”<sup>80</sup> The click of a button can lead to “the still, inanimate, image [...] drained of movement, the commonly accepted sign of life.”<sup>81</sup> As visual technologies develop, the dead come back in photography, come to life in film and die again in digital. The film industry has also significantly blurred the boundaries between then past and the present and the living and the dead in recent examples of dead actors, including Carrie Fisher and Peter Cushing, appearing in new content after their deaths through the use of Computer-Generated Imagery (CGI). As Penfold-Mounce has noted, “much angry and critical discussion followed regarding this use of the dead,” though it is worth noting, as Penfold-Mounce does, that Carrie Fisher did approve her own “CGI cameo” before her death.<sup>82</sup> The use of images of the dead in new content is not itself new. For example, Penfold-Mounce points out that James Dean’s family sold his image for product endorsements with one advertisement rewriting history so that Dean survived his fatal car crash, posing the idea: “given more time. Imagine the possibilities.”<sup>83</sup> This dictum itself is suggestive of the plethora of engagement with death and the dead, in particular the three television series discussed in this chapter, that bring back the dead in order to give them more time and imagine different possibilities of what their return might look like. Different ways of utilising, or perhaps in some cases of exploiting, the dead in film and television have certainly begun to be explored, with the resurrection of James Dean in an upcoming action drama film through a mixture of old footage and CGI having garnered accusations of “puppeteering the dead.”<sup>84</sup> Here, a dead actor will not be utilised to bring an existing character back to the screen but to play an entirely new character. In visual media, the ways in which the dead might return are myriad and, at times, ethically fraught.

Arguably, it is in the development of the moving image into television that provides, if not the most effective way of bringing back the dead, arguably a most apposite example of how the presence of the dead in late postmodern culture might be leveraged as a challenge to the death denial argument. As Durkin has pointed out, “death and dying are brought directly into homes via the medium of television.”<sup>85</sup> Television brings death and the dead right back into the place that the death denial argument often situates them as entirely absent from – the home. David Foster

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Penfold-Mounce, *Death, the Dead and Popular Culture*, 22.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>84</sup> Roisin O’Connor, “James Dean ‘resurrection’ for new film Finding Jack sparks furious row,” *The Independent*, November 8, 2019, accessed June 4, 2020, <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/news/james-dean-movie-finding-jack-cgi-chris-evans-elijah-wood-controversy-a9194446.html>

<sup>85</sup> Durkin, “Death, Dying, and the Dead in Popular Culture,” in *Handbook of Death and Dying*, 43.

Wallace, discussed in chapter one, was pioneering in taking television seriously as a “definer of the cultural atmosphere.”<sup>86</sup> He suggested that a fascination with watching people watching was beginning to emerge, citing the reflexivity of *The Dick Van Dyke Show* (1961-1966) and seeming to predict the emergence of the television phenomenon *Gogglebox* (2013-), the reality television show where you watch other people watch television.<sup>87</sup> He also predicted the growth of the phenomenon of ‘hate watching,’ diagnosing those younger than him with a “condition where they simultaneously hate, fear, and need television, and try to disinfect themselves of whatever so much viewing might do to them by watching TV with weary irony instead of the rapt credulity.”<sup>88</sup> He found the pinnacle of post-postmodernist fiction to be novels that resemble television, as they engage in “masterful reabsorption of the very features TV had absorbed from postmodern lit.”<sup>89</sup> Charles has written that television is “the cultural equivalent of the atom bomb: its confusion between the old and the new, between the archived and the live, has dissolved the distance between the past and the present.”<sup>90</sup> The dissolution of boundaries in television make it a particularly postmodern medium and one that is perhaps naturally oriented toward the hauntological, bringing back the past, confusing time and full of the dead.

Like autothanatography, television is also associated with the erosion of constructed boundaries between genres. Graeme Turner has argued that it is “pointless to insist on generic purity in relation to television programmes” given that “television genres are notoriously hybridized and becoming more so.”<sup>91</sup> Jowett and Abbott have discussed the “inherently hybrid nature” of television as a medium, which they suggest has made it necessary “to rethink” genres like horror “within a televisual context.”<sup>92</sup> Helen Wheatley associates television with the uncanny because of the ways in which “the unfamiliar (death, horror) is brought into the locale of the familiar (the home), almost to the point at which the unfamiliar becomes simultaneously familiar to the domestic viewer (we become used to seeing war, famine and other atrocities on television).”<sup>93</sup> Television, through which the dead enter into the “extra-textual domestic spaces of the medium” such as the

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<sup>86</sup> Wallace, “E Unibus Pluram,” 155.

<sup>87</sup> *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, created by Carl Reiner, CBS, 1961-1966, Television Series; *Gogglebox*, created by Stephen Lambert and Tania Alexander, Channel 4, 2013 – present, Television Series.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 192.

<sup>90</sup> Alec Charles, “The ideology of anachronism: television, history and the nature of time,” In *Time and Relative Dissertation in Space*, ed. David Butler (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 114.

<sup>91</sup> Graeme Turner, “Genre, hybridity and mutation,” in *The Television Genre Book*, eds. Glen Creeber, Toby Miller and John Tullock (London: BFI, 2001), 6.

<sup>92</sup> Lorna Jowett and Stacey Abbott, *TV Horror: Investigating the dark side of the small screen* (London and New York: I.B. Taurus, 2013), xiii.

<sup>93</sup> Helen Wheatley, *Gothic Television* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), 202.

home, is one of the most prominent ways in which death and the dead emerge in late postmodern culture.<sup>94</sup> With the rise of downloads and portable tablets, they also emerge in the day-to-day of commutes, work and study, and in any number of other contexts.

Television has also been associated with death and the dead in quite a different way. Henry Giroux has put forward the somewhat deterministic argument that television has been central in leading the living to resemble “armies of zombies,” who “tune in to gossip-laden entertainment, game, and reality TV shows, transfixed by the empty lure of celebrity culture.”<sup>95</sup> Giroux writes that “under a regime of privatized utopias, hyper-individualism, and ego-centred values, human beings” have effectively “slipped into a kind of ethical somnolence, indifferent to the plight and suffering of others.”<sup>96</sup> The zombie preoccupation evident in late postmodern culture, argues Giroux, portends “a new aesthetic in which hyper-violence is embodied in the form of a carnival of snarling creatures engorging elements of human anatomy.”<sup>97</sup> Voraciously consuming films, television, videogames and fiction that portray a violent undead, audience members themselves become zombie-like. Giroux’s adoption of the metaphor of the zombie is complicated and multi-faceted. He uses the “iconography of the living dead to signal a society that appears to have stopped questioning itself,” one that “revels in its collusion with human suffering” and one that is “awash in a culture of unbridled materialism and narcissism.”<sup>98</sup> The zombies are audiences, the electorate, political leaders, and financiers. However, they are also the global dispossessed, the by-products of capital accumulation, victims of a “kind of war machine and biopolitics committed to the creation of death-worlds.”<sup>99</sup> In the phrase “death-worlds” Giroux is signalling the work of Mbembe on necropolitics, discussed in chapter three. The undead of popular culture are a distracting, shadowy veil over, as well as a metaphor for, the living dead visible on news channels or sequestered from sight. The tension between popular culture and news media is central here. As Penfold-Mounce has explained, though the dead can be seen to proliferate in popular culture in such a manner that they have become a quotidian part of life that challenges the death denial thesis, “the news mediated dead remain controversial and uncomfortable viewing.”<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 200.

<sup>95</sup> Henry Giroux, *Zombie Politics and Culture in the Age of Casino Capitalism* (New York: Peter Lang, 2009), 4.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>100</sup> Penfold-Mounce, *Death, the Dead and Popular Culture*, 107.

Giroux's perspective has its roots in the theory of the Frankfurt School. Adorno and Horkheimer positioned the culture industry and "sound film" in particular as stupefying, leaving "no room for imagination or reflection on the part of the audience."<sup>101</sup> Marcuse understood television to be central to the anaesthetisation of the masses and a part of, as Kellner has explained, "an apparatus producing the thought and behavior needed for the social and cultural reproduction of contemporary capitalist societies."<sup>102</sup> Associations between the moving images of mass culture and zombie-like apathy and conformity are controversial but well established. They continue to permeate contemporary discourse. Yet as Sonia Livingstone has argued, television "constitutes a domain in which people ordinarily share experiences of the same complex, 'social messages'."<sup>103</sup> Television forms an important part of popular culture, which in turn, as Penfold-Mounce has argued, can itself be "understood as a hub through which death and the dead collide with the living."<sup>104</sup> It forms a "dynamic realm from which the dead can engage with the living forming an imaginative space where themes surrounding mortality can be raised and examined by scholars or lay people alike."<sup>105</sup> With the emergence of cultural studies and television studies and with the examination of television and popular culture within disciplines including sociology, television has gradually come to be analysed from a range of different perspectives, though its study has often had to be justified in ways that the study of more traditional texts and media might not. Here, three televisual narratives will be analysed in terms of the ways in which they bring the dead into the home – seemingly not in a bid to bring about the passive zombification of their audiences, but to provoke engagement with death and the dead.

Penfold-Mounce considers "how individuals and society become open to deliberating mortality within popular culture" and offers the categories of safe and provocative morbid spaces.<sup>106</sup> In safe morbid spaces, audiences can enjoy "gore and violence, death and the dead all of which is, according to public wisdom, either a taboo or at least an uncomfortable topic to discuss or individually contemplate."<sup>107</sup> In provocative morbid spaces, audiences are provoked "to consider uncomfortable issues that might be avoided elsewhere, such as selfhood and loss of that

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<sup>101</sup> Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (London and New York: Verso, 1997), 126.

<sup>102</sup> Douglas Kellner, "Critical Perspectives on Television from the Frankfurt School to Postmodernism," in *A Companion to Television*, ed. Janet Wasko (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 33; Herbert Marcuse, *One-dimensional man: studies in the ideology of advanced industrial society* (London: Kegan Paul, 1964).

<sup>103</sup> Sonia Livingstone, *Making Sense of Television: The psychology of audience interpretation*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Routledge, 1998), 1.

<sup>104</sup> Penfold-Mounce, *Death, the Dead and Popular Culture*, 114.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

selfhood.”<sup>108</sup> The three televisual narratives discussed here seem to adhere to the category of provocative morbid spaces, as they, like the autothanatography examined in chapter four, raise questions about mortality, the self, and the loss of the other, and adopt what Fisher calls an “existential orientation.”<sup>109</sup> One of the central features of these narratives that seems to enable their capacity to effectively provoke questions about death and the dead is their giving of a voice to the characters they bring back from the grave, not as manipulative demons or vampires, or as incorporeal but chatty ghosts, but simply as dead people. As Chris Baldick has emphasised, the decision to give the creature in *Frankenstein; Or, the Modern Prometheus* (1818) “an articulate voice was Mary Shelley’s most important subversion of the category of monstrosity,” and this tradition has evidently been carried on in a range of texts, especially in terms of the vampire, from Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897) to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) to *The Vampire Diaries* (2009-2017).<sup>110</sup> Darren Reed and Ruth Penfold-Mounce have pointed out that “rehumanized zombies seems to be a growing theme.”<sup>111</sup> Giving an articulate voice to the returned dead seems to be central to this rehumanising tendency. The dead in the three series discussed here are closer to zombies in their characterisation than to vampires or ghosts, though they do adhere to definitions of the latter in some ways. For example, they all seem to “encapsulate the contemporary focus on the pursuit of individualism, personhood, or individual rights” that Penfold-Mounce associates with the vampire.<sup>112</sup>

Valuable research into delineating and exploring the differences between the undead in popular culture can be seen in projects such as Williams and Schafer’s taxonomy of ghosts *Dis Manibus* and Thompson’s *The Map of Zombies*.<sup>113</sup> Yet as Callus suggests in relation to autothanatography, it is perhaps unwise to try to ask the “genre question” too much or categorise the dead.<sup>114</sup> Penfold-Mounce has argued that it is through their resistance to clear categorisation that the undead demonstrate agency. They “keep evolving,” and it is their “continual renewal and change that prevents either zombies or vampires from being typecast as a particular type of reanimated corpse.”<sup>115</sup> Examples of the returned dead that do not fit easily into any existing

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>109</sup> Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life*, 21.

<sup>110</sup> Chris Baldick, *In Frankenstein’s Shadow: Myth, Monstrosity, and Nineteenth-Century Writing* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 45; Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein: Or, the Modern Prometheus* (London: Penguin, 1992); Bram Stoker, *Dracula* (London: Penguin, 2004); *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*, created by Joss Whedon, The WB and UPN, 1997-2003, Television Series; *The Vampire Diaries*, developed by Kevin Williamson and Julie Plec, THE CW, 2009-2017, Television Series.

<sup>111</sup> Reed and Penfold-Mounce, “Zombies and the Sociological Imagination,” 129.

<sup>112</sup> Penfold-Mounce, *Death, the Dead and Popular Culture*, 81.

<sup>113</sup> Robert Williams and Hilmar Schafer, eds. *Dis Manibus: a taxonomy of ghosts from popular forms* (No location identified: UniPress, 2013); Jason Thompson, *The Map of Zombies*, January, 2014, accessed June 23, 2020, <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/22092473/the-map-of-zombies/>

<sup>114</sup> Callus, “(Auto)thanatography or (auto)thanatology?,” 435.

<sup>115</sup> Penfold-Mounce, *Death, the Dead and Popular Culture*, 68.

category can be found across a wide range of media. The three texts that have been selected here have been chosen in part because they are televisual, and as discussed above, television has been associated with bringing the dead into the home in a way that can be understood to challenge the death denial thesis. They have also been selected because of their explicit concern with ideas about selfhood and loss, both central to this thesis, and for the ways in which they express a concern with giving a voice to the dead less as monsters, than as those that came before and who maintain ties to the living. As noted above, the dead in the three series discussed here do not fit easily among the different categories of the undead that have been delineated. They are not the zombies of what is perhaps the most dominant zombie genre, survival horror. Though talking zombies can be found elsewhere, most typically in comedy genres, zombies rarely attain the level of articulacy (more often associated with the vampire) that they do here. In terms of television genre, the three series are all most easily described as supernatural drama, and this is the genre tag under which they can typically be located in terms of streaming services. Yet in some ways the series might also be positioned as social dramas, given the supernatural element is often downplayed and a series of social critiques are emphasised. Similarly, the focus on individuals and families and on geographies of grief might make the series better categorised purely as dramas. The series are all less concerned with a post-apocalyptic world in which the living must fight for survival than with worlds in which the dead must be recognised, returned to their families or communities, or rejected because, as this chapter will go on to discuss, the cost of openly welcoming them back is deemed too high. Though the existence of these televisual texts alongside an enormous range of other zombie texts and those that include the undead across a wide range of genres and media is indicative of the broader hospitality of the current moment to myriad engagement with death and the dead, these three series are particularly pertinent. Thematically, they can be understood as especially postmodern in their concern with giving voice to the marginalised, with the local and with family and community, with the return of history and with the notion of the self, the other, and hospitality. All three are also particularly melancholy in their tone and themes. They are emblematic, perhaps, of the intensification of the melancholy late postmodernism positioned in chapter one as having emerged from the 1990s onwards. Collectively they encapsulate the impulse to give a voice to the dead that this thesis argues is central to late postmodern culture. The themes to be discussed are the concept of generative melancholia in *Les Revenants*, undead possibilities in *In the Flesh*, responsibility in *The Fades*, and, in relation to all three series, the notion of hospitality.

### ***Les Revenants***



*Les Revenants* is a French supernatural drama series created by Fabrice Gobert which first aired in France in 2012. The series was shown with English subtitles in the UK on Channel 4 in 2013 and was given the title *The Returned*. The series is based on the 2004 French film directed by Robin Campillo also titled *Les Revenants*, subtitled in English and released with the title *They Came Back* in the same year. The series focuses on a close-knit community in a mountainous alpine town in which the dead begin to return. The deceased are initially unaware they are dead, having woken with no memory of their demise and no understanding that time has passed since their last living moments. Their personality remains intact and there is no physical indication they are dead. Camille, a fifteen-year-old teenager who has been dead for four years, killed in a bus crash on a school trip, wakes in the mountains and makes her way home, confused and disoriented. She anxiously suspects she may be suffering from a neurological condition due to her loss of memory. It is only when she encounters her twin sister face to face, now evidently four years older, that she realises there is something preternatural, if not supernatural, at play.

A number of other extremely similar series have emerged in recent years. The Australian *Glitch* (2015-2019) bears a striking resemblance, as does the US series *Resurrection* (2014-2015), which has a very similar premise and is based on a novel by Jason Mott also titled *The Returned* (2013).<sup>116</sup> There was an explicit US remake of *Les Revenants* titled *The Returned* (2015), which, despite being very similar, makes a series of changes for its target US audience.<sup>117</sup> In all of these series, the dead come back not as insensate zombies, bloodthirsty vampires or non-corporeal ghosts, but as themselves. They are lost and confused and none the wiser about what death entails than the living. Each of the series is to some extent distinctive, in particular in that though they all engage with ideas about history, responsibility and the legacy of the past, the histories they engage with are culturally specific. On a broad level, the conceptual similarity of the series and the financial investment made in their production are both indicative of the concern with the return of the dead in late postmodern culture that this thesis argues is so prevalent. The remarkable similarity between these series in terms of the dead returning is perhaps also indicative of a more widespread sense of history being quite literally upon us. As Eagleton suggests, and as discussed throughout this thesis, in some ways history is “no longer to be seen in linear terms as the chain of causality which produced the present” but rather as “kind of eternal present.”<sup>118</sup> *Les Revenants* and its similar counterparts

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<sup>116</sup> *Glitch*, created by Tony Ayres and Louise Fox, ABC, 2015-2019, Television Series; *Resurrection*, developed by Aaron Zelman, ABC, 2014-2015, Television Series. Jason Mott, *The Returned* (Toronto: Mira Books, 2014).

<sup>117</sup> *Les Revenants*, created by Fabrice Gobert, Haut et Court, 2012-2015, television series; *The Returned*, developed by Carlton Cruse, A&E Studios, 2015, Television Series.

<sup>118</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Oxford and Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1996), 202.

raise significant questions about history and the past encroaching on the present, death, loss and grief, and they can all be understood to produce what Penfold-Mounce calls a “provocative morbid space.”<sup>119</sup> Here, the way in which *Les Revenants* positions the return of the dead not as a consequence of the ‘unfinished business’ of the dead, but as a consequence of the incapacity of the living to ‘move on,’ will be examined.

### **Generative melancholia**

Luckhurst has suggested that “the breakout success” of *Les Revenants* with its “subtly disturbing narrative of the dead returning to their families and lovers as brute physical presences, markers of stalled mourning or melancholic denial” means a “twist away from the splatter-gore aesthetic that has predominated since Romero.”<sup>120</sup> Certainly, grief is at the fore of the series and, as Luckhurst points out, psychoanalytic themes of mourning and melancholia are apparent from the outset. *Les Revenants* offers a series of portraits of individual bereavement, each catastrophic and unique, and all experienced differently, complicating ideas about what mourning or melancholia might look like, but clearly engaged with popular understandings of loss and grief. As the first season progresses, a pattern appears to emerge in terms of who returns. The dead seem to come back only if someone living remains in a state of ‘pathological’ mourning, unable to ‘move on’ in a way that other bereaved characters around them seem to be able to do. The melancholia they seem to experience corresponds to Freud’s early conception of it as behaving “like an open wound,” characterised by a “profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of capacity to love, inhibition of all activity” and an utter “lowering of the self-regarding feelings.”<sup>121</sup> As Leader puts it, in melancholia “the lost loved one becomes a hole, an ever-present void which the melancholic cannot give up his attachment to.”<sup>122</sup> In *Les Revenants*, a number of the living seem unable to ‘give up’ their attachment to the dead, and this series seems concerned with examining not whether the dead return because of ‘unfinished business’ or to pay some symbolic debt, but as a consequence of the ways that loss is experienced by the living.

In this series, the difference between the living and the dead is, for the most part, almost impossible to identify. In appearance, they are perfectly well. They eat human food, though their appetite is insatiable, and they are articulate. The deconstruction of what might be understood as clear cut divisions is a central theme in the series and throughout, the notion of a clear-cut division

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<sup>119</sup> Penfold-Mounce, *Death, the Dead and Popular Culture*, 79.

<sup>120</sup> Luckhurst, *Zombies*, 188.

<sup>121</sup> Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” *Standard Edition*, 14: 253.

<sup>122</sup> Leader, *The New Black*, 198.

between 'successful mourning' and 'melancholia' is disrupted, its complexities revealed as innumerable. Derrida has written that "in the era of psychoanalysis, we all of course speak, and we can always go on speaking, about the 'successful' work of mourning or, inversely, as if it were precisely the contrary, about a 'melancholia' that would signal the failure of such work."<sup>123</sup> Many characters in *Les Revenants* are characterised by what might be understood as melancholia, including the young doctor Julie who, rather than having suffered a profound loss in another's death, has suffered from her own near-death experience at the hands of a brutal attacker and has become dejected and withdrawn, leading her to believe that perhaps she too is returned from the dead. Other characters such as Adele, whose fiancée died by suicide on their wedding day, are melancholic in some ways and in others, continue to live rich and fulfilling lives. Adele raises her daughter, works at a library and has a somewhat less fulfilling relationship with a local police officer. However, she is revealed to have tried to take her own life years previously too. Neither the differences between the living and the dead nor the differences between the 'successful' and the 'melancholic' when it comes to mourning are clear cut, their boundaries always complicated. Given the series significant concern with mourning, melancholia, the breaking down of constructed oppositions (living/dead; healthy/unhealthy mourning), the return of the past in the present and ambivalent, anti-consolatory and complex ideas about death and loss, it is a series heavily aligned with the postmodern impulses laid out in chapter two. It offers up ways in which the return of the dead, not as zombies but as a kind of wish-fulfilment, just as they were and healthy and well, might be imagined and 'made sense' of.

The first episode of *Les Revenants* introduces a support group for the parents of a group of children who died in a bus crash four years earlier. One of the couples who attends the group, Sandrine and Jan, announce that they are expecting another child after a great deal of effort to conceive. Sandrine express their thanks to the support group, which they feel helped them to "not exactly get over our loss but to carry on...move forward."<sup>124</sup> Her pregnancy is experienced as evidence that "life always prevails."<sup>125</sup> Those who attend the group are preparing for a ceremony to unveil a memorial for the children who died in the crash. Leader has focused on the way in which artistic creation can help those who are mourning a loss to create something "from lack" and mark "an empty space," but also emphasises that there is "never any question" that what is created would "replace" the loss it inscribes.<sup>126</sup> There is no doubt that those in the support group who have been

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<sup>123</sup> Jacques Derrida, "By Force of Mourning," trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas, *Critical Inquiry* 22.2 (1996): 174.

<sup>124</sup> *Les Revenants*, season one, episode one, "Camille," dir. Fabrice Gobert, November 26, 2012.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> Leader, *The New Black*, 208.

able to 'move on' to some degree are deeply affected by their loss, but they are positioned as experiencing their grief differently to other characters for whom the possibility of 'moving on' seems beyond them. It is these characters who are unable to 'move on' for whom, at first at least, it seems the dead return. Later in the first season, this is complicated too as more and more dead begin to return – some of them appearing to resemble more closely the traditional, inarticulate zombie. Sandrine suffers a traumatic miscarriage, her earlier stated belief that "life always prevails" undone, she blames the return of the dead for her and her husband's loss.<sup>127</sup> Though it is argued here that this series seeks to 'make sense' of death and the return of the dead, 'making sense' here is understood as a contradictory, complicated, and at core impossible, process that can never be completed, but that is somehow also unavoidable. Characters in this series grapple with trying to 'make sense' of their own experiences and of their losses in myriad ways, through faith, through connecting with the dead via psychics, through placing blame on themselves or others or by withdrawing from their social worlds and experiences into themselves. The series itself also places audiences in a position where they too must seek to 'make sense,' as much in *Les Revenants* is left unsaid and few questions are ever answered. The slow-paced series is full of unresolved cryptic, vague, and open-ended moments and plot lines, as the challenge of 'making sense' of the series comes to resemble the insurmountable challenge of seeking to make sense of the self or the other, prompting guess work, potential theories and competing ideas. It is in this sense that the series is arguably especially effective in prompting discussions about death and creating what Penfold-Mounce has called a "provocative morbid space," as the dead who return include murderers, children, the recently deceased and the long dead, and as each episode develops, any answers that the previous one offered are likely to be undone.<sup>128</sup> Yet at first, a clear pattern seems to emerge – that of the dead returning to those who were never able to 'get over' the death of their loved ones. As Luckhurst suggests, the dead appear to return as a consequence of "stalled mourning or melancholic denial."<sup>129</sup>

Camille is the first character the audience sees resurrected. Her parents manifest their grief in different ways and have separated due to the trauma of their loss. Camille's father, Jerome, drinks and visits a sex worker, Lucy, who it later transpires is psychic. Through intercourse with Jerome, Lucy is able to see his daughter and communicate with her. Claire, Camille's mother, keeps her daughter's room as a shrine, and will not attend the support group for bereaved parents. Their living

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> Penfold-Mounce, *Death, the Dead and Popular Culture*, 79.

<sup>129</sup> Luckhurst, *Zombies*, 188.

daughter, Camille's twin, lives in the shadow of her sister's death. A more marginal character, Mr Costa, whose wife returns after being dead for forty years, has a flat full of photographs of his dead wife and has never remarried. On his dead wife's return, Mr Costa is unable to believe that she is real. He ties his wife up before burning the house down and throwing himself off of the town's dam. Mrs Costa seems impervious to harm in her new dead state and remains in the series. Adele is remarrying ten years after the death of her daughter's father on their wedding day. She is reluctantly marrying a local police officer Thomas, whom she lives with but seems unable to love. A number of other characters also struggle with ambivalent attachments to the dead who seem to have haunted them long before their physical return. Yet their profound suffering seems to be in some way generative, as the dead that haunt them return in physical form. As Eng and Kazanjian have explained, in mourning, "the past is declared resolved, finished, and dead," but "in melancholia the past remains steadfastly alive in the present."<sup>130</sup> In *Les Revenants*, this kind of melancholia is initially positioned as generative or productive, seemingly having the capacity to revive the dead, and to manifest their presence physically.

In some ways, *Les Revenants* can be understood as offering an anti-consolatory message. Unmitigated suffering can bring back the dead. This is not, however, positioned as straightforward or desirable, and the subtle series explores loss from a range of perspectives. Adele, having experienced hallucinations after Simon's death and having believed herself now "cured," is concerned that her hallucinations have returned when she begins to see Simon again.<sup>131</sup> "I've been haunted before," she states, and now "it's happening again."<sup>132</sup> Discussing her experience with the local priest, she accepts that seeing Simon ahead of her impending wedding to Thomas may be an inevitable psychological response. Her marriage now is bringing up memories of her near-marriage then. It is only later that she discovers that the encounters she is having are real. She approaches the priest again, not revealing that Simon has really returned, but asking him what he thinks about resurrection. It is the priest, in an interesting syncretism of religious and typically more secular perspectives on loss, who tells her: "I believe that the people we have loved carry on living inside of us...The spirit is immortal...But if their bodies came back?...that might not be so desirable."<sup>133</sup> He questions, as the series itself does, the desirability of the dead ever really returning in physical form and the consequences of such a possibility both for the living and the dead. As the series progresses, why the dead have returned remains unclear, becoming even less clear as more and more dead

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<sup>130</sup> Eng and Kazanjian, "Introduction: mourning remains," 3-4.

<sup>131</sup> *Les Revenants*, season one, episode two, "Simon," Dir. Fabrice Gobert, November 26, 2012.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

begin to return, some just as they were when they died, some more animalistic and zombie like. The earliest returned dead also begin to deteriorate physically, though they remain entirely themselves in personality. It is unclear why they are deteriorating but one interpretation might be that the hostility toward them in the broader community is to blame, and the community's response to the dead in *Les Revenants* is considered in more detail in the later section of this chapter focused on hospitality in the three series.

The series seems to contend with what Davis has described as the way in which “we both want the dead and want to be rid of them,” reflecting a broader ambivalence toward death discussed in chapter two.<sup>134</sup> The dead in the series haunt the living when they are not there. When they come back, that haunting does not end but is further complicated. Concerns about memory akin to those discussed in chapter four are raised, as the physical presence of the dead begins to disrupt the memories that the living have solidified of them – though they are not different people, their behaviour at times challenges the versions of them that were being remembered, and the living seem unwilling to accept them in their full alterity and otherness in the way that Derrida asserts would be ethical in mourning. Mr. Costa takes his own life when confronted by his returned wife because her alterity is so overwhelming, her difference from the wife he has memorialised on the walls of his apartment so stark, even though she has not changed. As will be discussed at the end of this chapter in relation to hospitality toward the dead, this series also expresses a significant concern with what the living does to and with the dead. When the dead do return, the living seem unable to live with them. As the series progresses the living and the dead separate into different spaces, but some of the living, those who do not wish to ‘move on,’ choose to go with the dead. Again, Freudian psychoanalysis seems to be being obliquely referenced. As Leader has pointed out, “In mourning, we grieve the dead; in melancholia, we die with them.”<sup>135</sup>

### **In the Flesh**

*In The Flesh* is a series premised on the idea that zombieism has been identified as a disease requiring rehabilitation and a process of reintegrating zombies back into society. There has been a brief zombie apocalypse, referred to in the series as The Rising, after which the undead are rounded up and sent to detention and treatment centres. The series is set in rural Lancashire and is slow and dark aesthetically, full of stereotypically British weather. As the dead become rehumanised, no longer rabid and now able to communicate, they continue to appear deceased due to their pale skin

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<sup>134</sup> Davis, *Haunted Subjects*, 3.

<sup>135</sup> Leader, *The New Black*, 8.

colour and white eyes. As the rehabilitation programme comes to an end, they are to be sent home with their medication, but first are given make-up and contact lenses in order that they be able to integrate back into the community, at least visibly. A government minister spins a new name for them, in order to avoid using a term like zombie. They are called sufferers of ‘Partially Deceased Syndrome’ or PDS. The series has a number of central themes around ‘othering,’ exploring fears and anxieties about immigration and terrorism. In this series “the horror of the zombie threat” is, as Jon Stratton suggests, increased by “the ease with which the zombies can be read as illegal immigrants – or, indeed, legal immigrants from elsewhere in the European Union who are often identified as overwhelming British society.”<sup>136</sup> Suicide and sexuality are both thematically prevalent, with a number of homosexual male characters contending with families and communities who struggle or outright refuse to accept them both for their partially deceased status and their sexuality. The series also explores ‘mixed’ sexual relationships between the living and the dead and the ways in which relationships across constructed divisions can challenge discrimination and change attitudes. Here, however, the focus will be on the way in which the dead in the series negotiate their new status and contend with the possibility that in some ways, being dead might be better than being alive.

### Possibilities

The dead in this series ask the same questions as the living. They want to know why they are back and what the purpose of their new life is, and in their search for meaning some of them become ‘radicalised.’ Early on, the central character and former zombie Kieren makes it clear that he is “not one of those people that thinks what we did [as zombies] was OK because we’re an advanced species,” a message spread by the character the Undead Prophet, leader of the Undead Liberation Army.<sup>137</sup> This series is particularly pertinent to Khapaeva’s argument discussed in chapter two, which suggests that in recent decades there has been a profound rejection of human exceptionalism and “a disillusionment with humanity” that has rendered “monsters attractive.”<sup>138</sup> Khapaeva associates this rejection of human exceptionalism more broadly with the animal rights movement, and suggests that in the current climate “the aspiration to transcend humanity voiced by transhumanism and posthumanism” became a “logical step.”<sup>139</sup> In the first episode, one undead character reminds another that “they killed us too y’know,” questioning the privileging of the human subject.<sup>140</sup> In the second season, two members of the Undead Liberation Army break into the local surgery and

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<sup>136</sup> Jon Stratton, “Zombie Trouble: Zombie texts, bare life and displaced people,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 14:265 (2011): 275, doi: 10.1177/1367549411400103

<sup>137</sup> *In the Flesh*, season one, episode three, dir. Jonny Campbell, March 31, 2013.

<sup>138</sup> Khapaeva, *The Celebration of Death*, 1.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>140</sup> *In the Flesh*, season one, episode one, dir. Jonny Campbell, March 17, 2013.

release two untreated undead from a cage where they are being stored for collection. Spray-painting ULA over the walls, they try to encourage the untreated partially deceased to leave of their own volition, reassuring and encouraging them, but in their untreated states they are unable to comprehend. They remain at the surgery and attack the receptionist when she responds to the alarm triggered by the break in. Here parallels with animal rights groups, if stereotypical ones, are especially evident.

A number of reasons are given for why being 'partially deceased' in the series might be better than being alive. The undead Amy asks, "What is every living person afraid of? Death! We can smash the clock to pieces."<sup>141</sup> A central character in season two gives an emotive speech about the depression he experienced in life leading to his suicide. Because he will never 'naturally' die and he is no longer subject to human finitude in the same way, he apparently no longer has any wish to die. The central character Kieren tells his family that the feeling of rising up from his grave was "what being born must be like. Except you've got context."<sup>142</sup> He tells them that being dead "doesn't compare" because "everything up to then" was "different levels of fear."<sup>143</sup> Without the fear, he approaches life with new zeal: "Yeah, come on. Give it to me. Fill me up."<sup>144</sup> Another character is more explicitly critical of humanity. He died a young man when he was mugged outside of a shop for only "Five pounds and twelve pence" which he would have "given them [...] if they'd just asked."<sup>145</sup> He explains:

The person who pulled the curtain on me, all they wanted to do was survive a little bit longer. That's the driving force at the core of every human being. Forget morality and ethics, all the other bullshit they say they're striving for. The living just care about surviving, for as long as humanly possible. It's pitiful. A pitiful desperate existence. We're better than that. We're free.<sup>146</sup>

This character positions being dead as freedom from the constraints of humanity, which is denigrated and undermined, as the 'we' of the dead are confirmed to be better than the 'they' of the living. As the final section of this chapter will discuss, the lack of hospitality toward the dead by the living is manifested in a number of ways in the series and the challenges of being truly hospitable to the dead are explored. The living struggle to accept the dead as they are, preferring them to maintain the illusion of being alive, and are evidently challenged by the notion that the dead might be better, or better off, than the living. This is something that the doctors treating the undead

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<sup>141</sup> *In the Flesh*, season one, episode two, dir. Jonny Campbell, March 24, 2013.

<sup>142</sup> *In the Flesh*, season two, episode four, dir. Damon Thomas, May 25, 2014.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>145</sup> *In the Flesh*, season two, episode five, dir. Alice Troughton, June 1, 2014.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*



explicitly suggest, as one of them explains: “They are not of this world, but partially they are. In a lot of ways they’re a superior species. They’re a new kind of sentient being.”<sup>147</sup> To welcome them in completely would be to acknowledge the ways in which their existence might be superior to that of the living.

Though this series evidently suggests a rejection of human exceptionalism in some ways, in others it seems to reassert the value of life and the capacity of love to be restorative. The character Philip asks, “if we don’t finish [...] it sort of becomes pointless, doesn’t it?”<sup>148</sup> Here he implies that life is a narrative, a story or a game, with a structure that only ‘makes sense’ if it has an ending. Philip is, at the beginning of the series, a fairly unpleasant character, unaccepting of difference and certainly of the reintroduction of the partially deceased into the community. As the series progresses, he falls in love with the dead Amy and his personality transforms. In turn, though no definite reason is given for why, she too transforms and begins to become human again – a move also made in the popular novel *Warm Bodies* (2010) by Isaac Marion and its 2013 film adaptation of the same name.<sup>149</sup> This series conceives of a self that carries on after death, perhaps signalling a current concern with the perpetuation of the individual legacies of the dead. Though the characters’ experiences shape them, Amy reminds us that: “you’re still you. Dead or alive.”<sup>150</sup>

The series also offers the possibility of a space in which the conversations that can never happen get to happen. Ideas about continuing conversations with the dead discussed in chapter four are here examined from the perspective of actually being able to talk to the dead again, and for them to talk back. This is most poignant in relation to Kieren’s conversations about his suicide. The series brings about a set of circumstances in which Kieren finds himself once more in the same circumstances that led to his suicide. Audiences gradually learn why Kieren took his own life as it is made clear that he and his best friend Rick were romantically involved. Rick’s father Bill pressures Rick into enlisting in the army and he is posted to Afghanistan, where he soon dies. Kieren blames himself for this and, overwhelmed with grief, ends his life. At the end of the first episode, we learn that Rick has been located and is being sent home. He is partially deceased. A consideration of Rick’s return and his father Bill’s absolute denial about his PDS status are considered later in this chapter in relation to the theme of hospitality. For Kieren, Rick’s return is a gift. His return also reveals to

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<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

<sup>149</sup> Isaac Marion, *Warm Bodies* (London: Vintage, 2010); *Warm Bodies*. dir. Jonathan Levine, Mandeville Films, 2013, Feature Film.

<sup>150</sup> *In the Flesh*, season two, episode six, dir. Alice Troughton, June 8, 2014.

audiences some of their relationship when they were alive through the conversations they are able to have. Rick asks Kieren how he died and Kieren responds “When you died. Everything turned to shit. Life didn’t mean anything anymore.”<sup>151</sup> Rick establishes that Kieren, as Rick puts it, “offed” himself, with the stigma around suicide in their rural British village emphasised.<sup>152</sup> The two talk and Rick is evidently angry, but they are able to ask each other questions and discuss why Rick did not write, why had he left, and how Kieren had felt. Kieren tells Rick that after he left for Afghanistan: “I kept us going, in my head, I kept us alive.”<sup>153</sup> This resonates with the ideas discussed in chapter four about the ways in which the living can be responsible for perpetuating their memories of the dead. Yet Kieren also held himself accountable for Rick’s death and this was intolerable, leading to his suicide. Later in the first season, Rick in his undead state is killed again, this time directly by his father. Kieren is given the possibility of a second chance to do things differently and this time, the outcome of Rick’s death and its impact on him are very different.

Kieren once again finds himself at a total loss as a consequence of Rick’s death. He heads to the cave where he took his own life the first time. However, on this occasion his mother knows where to look for him. His father, traumatised by finding his dead son’s body the first time, is unable to return there and waits at home. Kieren and his mother discuss his feelings about Rick’s death and how he blames himself. He explains that “it’s become just like before I don’t know how to change it.”<sup>154</sup> His mother tells him: “this time, you live.”<sup>155</sup> She reveals that she had a similar experience at the age of eighteen after a breakup. She decided to take her own life, but after talking to a man at the chemist who refused to sell her any drugs she felt better. The man is revealed to be Kieren’s father, and this the story of how his parents met. She explains that she wishes his father would talk more – “not about blu-rays or the weather” but about “real stuff.”<sup>156</sup> The two head home and Kieren encourages his father to get angry and shout, to explain how conflicted, worried, sick, furious and traumatised he felt as a consequence of his son’s suicide. His words gradually descend into floods of tears and he is unable to speak anymore. The two embrace. This moving depiction of a family able to have the kind of conversation that many might wish to have with their dead loved ones emphasises the way in which this series functions to produce what Penfold-Mounce terms a “provocative morbid space” in which audiences can contend with and negotiate death, grief and loss.<sup>157</sup> The

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<sup>151</sup> *In the Flesh*, season one, episode two, dir. Jonny Campbell, March 24, 2013.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>154</sup> *In the Flesh*, season one, episode three, dir. Jonny Campbell, March 31, 2013.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>157</sup> Penfold-Mounce, *Death, the Dead and Popular Culture*, 79.

complexity of both Kieren's and his family's emotions are not shied away from, and throughout the series into season two there is a continued sense of the family's complex emotional responses to Kieren's return. The ways in which they vacillate between welcoming him and being afraid of him are considered later in this chapter in relation to the theme of hospitality. In terms of possibilities, what the return of the dead offer in this series is a second chance, an opportunity to do things differently, a scenario in which conflicting feelings and difficult conversations can be played out, and a chance to imagine what the return of the dead into the world of the living might truly look like in a local, rural British community.

### **The Fades**

This series envisages a world that seems at first exactly like modern day England but where the dead, since the twentieth century and unbeknownst to the majority of the living around them, have been unable to die 'properly.' In some ways this seems to accord well with the death denial argument, as it suggests that the technological developments of the twentieth century 'broke' death and that the dead are all around us, ignored, alone and increasingly angry. In the mythology of the series, the dead used to 'ascend' to some unknown plane. Since the invention of concrete, the "holes in the world" that acted as ascension points began to disappear and as a consequence the dead could not leave.<sup>158</sup> The dead who get stuck on earth, invisible to most of the living and unable to touch, slowly rot away and deteriorate as they watch their loved ones live, and eventually die, around them. This disturbing fate is indiscriminate and can happen to anyone. The central character Paul queries whether these people, called the Fades, are bad people, and is given the response: "Good? Bad? Why people believe death is somehow fair... Death is random - same as life is. Life has famine, illness, shitiness. Death is similarly crap."<sup>159</sup> The Fades find a way to become corporeal again and an apocalypse looms as, by the end of the first and only season of the show, the world is at risk of collapsing into pure ash.

The series is in many ways hopeless and unforgiving, with key characters and those of central importance to the teenage protagonist Paul being murdered or descending into madness. In the first episode, Paul himself asks his therapist "What does madness look like?" and setting out from the beginning the theme in the series of considering what constitutes sanity and insanity.<sup>160</sup> Paul is concerned that his visions and ability to see the dead are a sign of madness, but the series

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<sup>158</sup> *The Fades*, episode one, dir. Farren Blackburn, September 21, 2011.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*

suggests that it is a failure to account for the dead or to be accountable to the dead, the living or the future of humanity that is really 'mad,' given that it seems to lead to the total destruction of the planet. The series begins and ends with a derelict shopping centre and as such draws themes about capitalism, consumerism and their failures as political ideologies, continuing a trend of associating zombies and consumerism that was arguably initiated in George A. Romero's *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), as discussed by Stephen Harper in his analysis of shopping malls, zombies and the consumerism debate.<sup>161</sup> Throughout the first and only series there is an emphasis on Paul's apocalyptic visions of an ashen, destroyed planet, culminating in a final scene in which the sky above the characters fills with thunder and a yellow glare as the apocalypse seems to commence. The now mentally unstable and murderous Neil, driven to extreme measures by countless traumatic experiences, exclaims "I told him. Don't fuck with ascension!" suggesting that it is the destruction of something natural, something that should not have been interfered with my humans, that is leading to planetary catastrophe.<sup>162</sup>

The series can certainly be read as a response to the climate emergency. Critics have wondered why the series was cancelled. The show aired on BBC3, the remit of which is 16-34 year olds, but was in reality more popular with older audiences and in particular critics.<sup>163</sup> It is possible that the hopeless tone of the series, in which planetary destruction seemed inevitable and the loss of loved ones is such a central experience for its young characters, failed to resonate with young audiences. One way of explaining the popularity of the series with older audiences rather than younger ones might be found in a discussion between Caroline Hickman and Verity Sharp on how to speak to children about climate change, in which they suggest that it is adults that are the ones who are scared, embarrassed and guilty about the ecological crisis and climate emergency, given they may have lived for many years without an awareness of the consequences of climate change, whereas young people may experience anger and frustration at what is for them not a new situation but the only reality they have known.<sup>164</sup> The series emphasis on responsibility, climate crisis and loss

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<sup>161</sup> *Dawn of the Dead*, dir. George A. Romero, United Film Distribution Company, 1978, Feature Film; Stephen Harper, "Zombies, Malls and the Consumerism Debate: George Romero's *Dawn of the Dead*," *Americana* 1:2 (2002), accessed 5 June, 2020, [https://www.americanpopularculture.com/journal/articles/fall\\_2002/harper.htm](https://www.americanpopularculture.com/journal/articles/fall_2002/harper.htm)

<sup>162</sup> *The Fades*, episode four, dir. Tom Shankland, October 26, 2011.

<sup>163</sup> BBC, "Entertainment on BBC," *Commissioning*, accessed June 23, 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/commissioning/tv/articles/entertainment-bbc-three>; Louisa Mellor, "The Fades: Celebrating BBC Three Originals," *Den of Geek*, February 19, 2016, accessed June 23, 2020, <https://www.denofgeek.com/tv/the-fades-celebrating-bbc-three-originals/>

<sup>164</sup> Caroline Hickman and Verity Sharp, "Talking with Children about Climate Change," *Climate Crisis Conversations: Catastrophe or Transformation*, The Climate Psychology Alliance, August 2, 2019, accessed June 7, 2020, <https://www.climatepsychologyalliance.org/podcasts/370-3-talking-with-children-about-climate-change>

might resonate more with those seeking to 'make sense' of a new reality than with those for whom the climate emergency has been a constant backdrop of their lived experience. The theme of responsibility is certainly at the fore in this series terms of how humans have treated the planet, how humans have treated each other, and the responsibility that the living have for remembering how the dead came to be dead.

### Responsibility

The dead in *The Fades* do want to eat the flesh of the living and as such their existence is highly incompatible with a world in which the dead might live alongside each other in harmony. They began as something similar to a ghost – invisible, unable to touch, unable to communicate with the living bar a few humans who are aware of them. John, one of the dead and the central antagonist in the series, discovers after his wife takes her own life and he lays down beside the bath where she is bleeding, that when the blood falls into his mouth, he begins to rehumanise. As he develops into something new that threatens humanity, he seeks to bring the other Fades with him. Though they were not all 'bad' to begin with, being dead, ignored, alone, gradually rotting away, has made them angry. John justifies his actions in killing the living, explaining that "for nearly 70 years I watched my wife suffer while my Fade body rotted away from me."<sup>165</sup> He was "one of the first" to fail to ascend, having been "killed by a mortar" in "Sicily, 1943."<sup>166</sup> He attributes the breaking of ascension to the sheer amount of deaths that occurred in World War II, stating that "there was so much death, it's no wonder the ladder got broken" and he, "along with thousands, possibly millions of others, became trapped in a world" they could not touch.<sup>167</sup> He emphasises that he "didn't deserve it. None of us did."<sup>168</sup> Though the dead in the series are perpetrators in that they kill and consume the living, they are also victims. Fisher argued in *Ghosts of My Life* that "we remain trapped in the 20<sup>th</sup> century."<sup>169</sup> In this series, the dead of the twentieth century have been trapped in the world of the present as a consequence of the actions of the living.

*The Fades* is the series perhaps most susceptible to being read alongside the central themes of hauntology, given its explicit concern with the consequences of the atrocities of the twentieth century. As Shaw has written, "hauntology is motivated by an interest in illuminating a past we do not know, as well as preventing us from forgetting a history we would sometimes rather not

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<sup>165</sup> *The Fades*, episode four, dir. Tom Shankland, October 12, 2011.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>169</sup> Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life*, 8.

know.”<sup>170</sup> The responsibility that the living have to protect nature and natural processes is emphasised and the consequences of human ‘progress’ are questioned. This also makes the series one that can be easily read in terms of postmodernism, a central tenet of which, as discussed in chapter one, was the questioning of the ideas the Enlightenment. The living, according to the series, have for decades ignored the existence of the dead and it is the living who, in collective legacy if not individually, are responsible for having put them there in the first place. Moreover, the living owe their own lives in part to the sacrifices, willing or unwilling, of the dead who died at war. In this sense the series is particularly relevant to Derrida’s discussion of responsibility in *Specters of Marx*. Derrida writes that no justice

seems possible or thinkable without the principle of some *responsibility*, beyond all living present [...] before the ghosts of those who are not yet born or who are already dead, be they victims of wars, political or other kinds of violence [...] without this responsibility and respect for justice concerning those who *are not there*, of those who are no longer or who are not yet *present and living*, what sense would there be to ask the question “where?” “where tomorrow?”<sup>171</sup>

Derrida suggests that in order to begin imagining a future, time must be folded in on itself and responsibility enacted toward the dead and the not yet alive as much as the living, all of whom need to be taken into account.

Yet the challenges to this are insurmountable in *The Fades*, and the damage done by human interference in the ‘natural order’ of things is irreversible, adding again to the melancholy tone of the series that reflects so closely the melancholy tone of late postmodern culture set out in chapter one. If the dead were to be accepted in this series, their rights and entitlement to justice acknowledged, then the living would have to die in order to sustain the dead. Sending the dead back to where they belong in the storyworld is also positioned at the very end of the series as too little too late, as *The Fades* ends with the central character Paul reinstating ascension so that the Fades all head off to their next and unknown destination, but as mentioned earlier this act is soon positioned as the kind of human interference with the ‘natural’ order of things that has consequences. Dark clouds roll in and an apocalypse seems to begin. Though the series emphasises responsibility, accountability, the importance of the recognition of past atrocities and of the culpability of the living, it does not suggest that these things will offer a panacea for the threats that face the living now or in the future. In only six episodes this series, like *Les Revenants* and *In the Flesh*, is also successful in producing a “provocative morbid space,” and in particular one that is focused on vital,

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<sup>170</sup> Shaw, *Hauntology*, 19.

<sup>171</sup> Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, xviii. Italics in original.

difficult and divisive themes of climate emergency, responsibility and the legacy of human atrocities.<sup>172</sup>

## Hospitality

Like the examples of twenty-first century English literature that Shaw examines, these series explore “the challenge posed by not only confronting the ‘Other’, but welcoming them in.”<sup>173</sup> The dead in the series can be read as metaphors for a host of different, specific others. They can also be read in psychoanalytic terms as representing the other who might be welcomed into the self as part of a process of mourning, whose alterity, according to Derrida, should be acknowledged and maintained in a “faithful interiorization” that “bears the other and constitutes him in me (in us), at once living and dead.”<sup>174</sup> Welcoming the dead and being hospitable toward them is presented as difficult, if not impossible, in all of the series. Expanding on the meaning of hospitality, Derrida has explained that if the host expects something from the guest, this is “not hospitality but conditional hospitality.”<sup>175</sup> In a conditional hospitality the “host remains the master in the house, the country, the nation, he controls the threshold, he controls the borders, and when he welcomes the guest he wants to keep the mastery.”<sup>176</sup> In each of the series, the living have expectations of the dead, and this puts limits on what hospitality they offer. Derrida opposes conditional hospitality with “‘unconditional’ or ‘pure’ hospitality, which is without conditions.”<sup>177</sup> This kind of hospitality, a hospitality that is unconditional

implies that you don’t ask the other, the newcomer, the guest to give anything back, or even to identify himself or herself. Even if the other deprives you of your mastery or your home, you have to accept this. It is terrible to accept this, but that is the condition of unconditional hospitality: that you give up the mastery of your space, your home, your nation. It is unbearable. If, however, there is pure hospitality, it should be pushed to this extreme.<sup>178</sup>

In offering such a pure hospitality it would be necessary to “accept the risk of the other coming and destroying the place, initiating a revolution, stealing everything, or killing everyone.”<sup>179</sup> The hospitality offered to the dead in these series is very much conditional.

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<sup>172</sup> Penfold-Mounce, *Death, the Dead and Popular Culture*, 79.

<sup>173</sup> Shaw, *Hauntology*, 60.

<sup>174</sup> Derrida, *MEMOIRES for Paul de Man*, 35.

<sup>175</sup> Jacques Derrida in “Hospitality, justice and responsibility: a dialogue with Jacques Derrida,” in *Questioning Ethics: Contemporary Debates in Philosophy*, eds. Richard Kearney and Mark Dooley (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 69.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*

The theme of hospitality, and inhospitality, toward the dead is most evident in *In the Flesh*, given the focus of the series is the reintegration of the undead into communities. In *In the Flesh*, the living want the dead to conform, wear make-up, blend in and assimilate. The living are threatened by the otherness of the dead and the possibility that they might be better, or more powerful, or superior in their new state of being and as such they police boundaries between the living and the dead. Season two of *In the Flesh* explores how the Domicile Care Initiative, in which the undead in their treated state are sent home to be cared for, came about. The dead are cared for by primary caregivers. In line with *In the Flesh* as a series that it is suggested here can be read as both supernatural drama and social drama or critique, it is notable that the primary caregiver support group in the series is attended entirely by women. This initiative is positioned in the series as a way to save money for the government, for whom continuing to keep the undead in treatment centres run by a private company is deemed unfeasible. Throughout the series references are made to outsourcing, bureaucracy, and local and national politics that reflect the 'real' world of Britain in the twenty-first century, with capitalism and democratic pluralism at the core. A political party named Invictus emerges in season two, with elected members of parliament who have stood on the platform of being 'anti-PDS.' It is clear that the circumstances in which the dead are returned to their communities are far from conducive to them receiving a hospitable welcome.

Some of the undead are returning to homes where, in their untreated state, they killed a family member, or to communities they ravaged. One doctor treating them explains that "they aren't ready to go back into society [...] for all intents and purposes they are reanimated corpses. And if they miss a dose of the drug they revert back to their rabid state. They're not cured."<sup>180</sup> Roarton, the rural community in which the series is based, is especially inhospitable to the dead. Roarton is described as "quite infamous for its views on assimilation" and is the home of the HVF, the Human Volunteer Force.<sup>181</sup> The anger and heightened fear of the undead in this community is partly rooted in circumstance that again acts as commentary on the inequalities in twenty-first century Britain, as army troops were promised during The Rising but never arrived because the government's focus was on protecting cities. One local, Ken, questions the newly appointed Minister for Partially Deceased Affairs at a community meeting: "Why put the people who tried to destroy our community back amongst us? It's reckless and dangerous, and if yer ask

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<sup>180</sup> *In the Flesh*, season two, episode five, dir. Alice Troughton, June 1, 2014.

<sup>181</sup> *In the Flesh*, season one, episode one, dir. Jonny Campbell, March 17, 2013.



me; downright foolish.”<sup>182</sup> It later transpires that Ken’s vocal criticism is in part an effort to protect his own partially deceased wife, whom he is hiding at home, in the context of a community where the Human Volunteer Force has still not disbanded years after The Rising.

Like *Les Revenants*, much of *In the Flesh* is focused on homes, what happens behind closed doors and in the domestic setting, with houses often shifting between homely and unhomely depending on a character’s circumstances. At the treatment centre, Kieren is reluctant to go home, fearing the response he will receive from his family and community. Kieren’s family are also apprehensive owing to the wider Roarton community’s views on assimilating the undead, and their daughter’s role as a member of the Human Volunteer Force. Kieren’s parents are attempting to sell their house and move but as others come to view their property, it soon emerges that those looking to buy and those looking to sell all have one thing in common. They are looking for somewhere more “remote” in order to protect their undead family members from inhospitable and potentially deadly communities.<sup>183</sup> When collecting Kieren from the treatment centre his parents hide him under blankets in the back of the car and reverse him into the garage. Kieren is forced to remain indoors, as his former home becomes a new kind of domestic detention. Not long after his return, the family discover that the Human Volunteer Force are on their way to the street to locate a partially deceased person who is being hidden. Thinking it is their son who is to be attacked, they retrieve a gun, a chainsaw and a bat covered in nails. These weapons seem to have been kept ready from the time they were required during The Rising to fight off the threat from the dead. Now, they are being used to fight off a threat from the living. It is soon revealed, however, that it is the next-door neighbour Ken who is being targeted.

Ken has kept his partially deceased wife Maggie hidden in the house. Bill, leader of the local Human Volunteer Force, has her retrieved and makes her kneel in the street in her nightgown. Despite Ken’s pleas Bill goes to shoot Maggie in the back of the head, but he is unable to. With make-up and contact lenses she looks human, and Bill hesitates before asking her to remove her contact lenses. She consents and he executes her. Here Bill is asking Maggie to reveal herself as other, to show her full alterity so that he can feel emboldened to kill her, once she has been fully revealed to be not like himself. This both demonstrates the extremely inhospitable environment in which the undead find themselves, and also explicitly goes against

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<sup>182</sup> Ibid.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid.

what Derrida emphasises as the core of true hospitality, in which you “don’t ask the other, the newcomer [...] even to identify himself or herself” but accept them as they are.<sup>184</sup> The series raises interesting questions about the identification of the other, many of which can be understood as underpinned by a desire on behalf of the living to control the dead.

In the example of Maggie’s execution, Bill’s request that she remove the contact lenses is what enables him to fully identify her as someone he will have no guilt over executing. Yet as a member of the undead, she has been forced to wear the contact lenses and make-up in order that she not be identified as other visually. The living are seen to make competing demands on the dead. The open hostility toward the partially deceased and their families escalates here to murder, as an inhospitable community becomes one that condones the killing of those deemed not to be a part of it. Legally, the dead are also not given the same status as the living in *In the Flesh* on a national scale in terms of legal frameworks for justice. In season two it is revealed that those who kill the undead receive half sentences in a court of law, as the undead are deemed legally to be “half a person.”<sup>185</sup> Though the government have put in place the PDS Protection Act and Domicile Care Initiative, it is evident that the partially deceased are not treated as equal. In season one, their homes are spray-painted to identify them. In season two, they are forced to identify themselves legally on their passports and are forced to take part in the Give Back Scheme in which they undertake labour with no pay and are regularly humiliated, forced to wear orange high visibility aprons and introduce themselves as follows: “I am a fully compliant PDS Sufferer. I have been administered Neurotriptyline within the last twenty four hours and will not enter a rabid state.”<sup>186</sup> Here, again, the undead are forced to identify themselves, but not in ways that make the living uncomfortable – they must announce their presence, but reduce physical markers of their difference. What is evident here is the desire of the living to have total control over the dead and their willingness to tolerate them only if they adhere to a set of rules with regard to both their behaviour and their appearance.

The removal of make-up, visibly identifying the partially deceased for what they are, is a recurring point of tension in this series. The partially deceased are marked out in the broader community in various ways, for example by having their houses painted with PDS and by aprons they must wear when taking part in the Give Back Scheme. However, if the partially deceased

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<sup>184</sup> Derrida, “Hospitality, justice and responsibility,” 69.

<sup>185</sup> *In the Flesh*, season two, episode one, dir. Jim O’Hanlon, May 4, 2014.

<sup>186</sup> *In the Flesh*, season two, episode six, dir. Alice Troughton, June 8, 2014.

personally choose not to wear make-up they are marking themselves out as different, and this is deemed unacceptable by the community at large. When the undead Amy chooses to go “au naturale” she is punished.<sup>187</sup> Gary, a Human Volunteer Force member, tells her that not wearing make-up is a “slap in the face to this community. To war heroes like me.”<sup>188</sup> He proceeds to assault her, dragging her to her make-up table and smearing make-up over her face shouting “In this village, yer cover up yer rotter face! Got it!”<sup>189</sup> What becomes clear here is that the living community perceive that they should be able to identify the deceased, but that their assimilation into the community must be based on their diminishing their own otherness. Any pride in their own selfhood as partially deceased people is punished. These efforts to control the dead and dictate their appearance and behaviour along with identifying them only on human terms emphasises how provisional the hospitality afforded to them is in Derridean terms. Derrida writes that under provisional hospitality, the “host remains the master in the house, the country, the nation, he controls the threshold, he controls the borders, and when he welcomes the guest he wants to keep the mastery.”<sup>190</sup> This is evident throughout *In the Flesh* through acts such as beating the bounds of the village with weapons, border fences, registers of the deceased who must self-report regularly and various efforts by the living to show control over the dead.

Throughout both seasons of *In the Flesh* tensions also emerge between those who are positive about the integration of the deceased into the community and those who are not. Recognising how inhospitable Roarton is for the partially deceased, a doctor suggests Kieren move away. However, a local nurse challenges him: “why should he have to move? He was born, bred and died here.”<sup>191</sup> Others refuse to shift their views, with the local vicar telling his parishioners that “those things are not what they appear to be. They are not your neighbours; they are not your friends. They are imposters!”<sup>192</sup> Yet it is also revealed that two of the most outspoken critics of the partially deceased being reintegrated into society, the local vicar and the local Invictus member of parliament, are motivated by their own desires for their dead loved ones to return. They are convinced that if they destroy all of the first risen a Second Rising will occur, and their dead family members will come back to them. Here, the difference between the dead other and the dead loved one come to the fore. When the deceased is known, their return is desirable. When they are wholly other, more easily dismissible as monsters, it is not. This is a

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<sup>187</sup> *In the Flesh*, season one, episode two, dir. Jonny Campbell, March 24, 2013.

<sup>188</sup> *In the Flesh*, season one, episode three, dir. Jonny Campbell, March 31, 2013.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid.

<sup>190</sup> Derrida, “Hospitality, justice and responsibility,” 69.

<sup>191</sup> *In the Flesh*, season two, episode one, dir. Jim O’Hanlon, May 4, 2014.

<sup>192</sup> *In the Flesh*, season one, episode three, dir. Jonny Campbell, March 31, 2013.

pattern that is evident in all three of these series. In *The Fades* the returned dead are, on the whole, very old and as a consequence they are not known to any of the living. There is no one left alive to want them back and as such, their return is undesirable for all of the living characters in the series. Yet when one of the characters in the series dies and fails to ascend, attitudes toward the undead Fades become more complex as she is still beloved by those around her. In *Les Revenants*, those whose loved ones come back are typically, though notably not always, ready to welcome them despite their confusion and varying degrees of ambivalence. The prospect of hordes of the dead returning, however, is evidently less desirable. In all of the series, the tensions between welcoming back the dead *en masse* and what that might look like, and welcoming back your own beloved dead, are explored. Where one might be desirable, the other might be disastrous.

Yet even within their own immediate families, the undead receive complicated welcomes. In *In the Flesh*, Kieren's family are uncomfortable with his partially deceased status and prefer him to always wear his make-up and contact lenses. He internalises their fear and displays disgust at his own appearance, covering the mirror with a towel when he takes off his make-up and removes his contact lenses. He tells his friend that his family "don't like admitting" he is dead.<sup>193</sup> They ask him to pretend to eat from his plate at the dinner table to maintain the illusion he is human. His friend Amy suggests they should "start getting used to it," and that so should he, accepting himself as he is – deceased.<sup>194</sup> However, he is unable to accept himself fully without his family's acceptance first. In seeking to ensure Kieren always adheres at least visibly to the living version of himself that they remember, Kieren's family refuse to acknowledge what Derrida calls the "singular alterity" of the dead.<sup>195</sup> The consequences for Kieren are profound, in that he can neither accept his new self nor feel truly at home in an environment where he is required to act as though he is alive in order to feel accepted. Yet they do accept him, if only provisionally, and this is emphasised in the series by the very different reception that the undead character Rick receives from his father.

Rick's father, who is the head of the Human Volunteer Force and who has already executed another local partially deceased woman Maggie, is in complete denial about his own

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<sup>193</sup> *In the Flesh*, season one, episode two, dir. Jonny Campbell, March 24, 2013.

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>195</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Béliers. *Le Dialogue ininterrompu: entre deux infinis, le poème.*" (Paris: Galilée, 2003). Section trans. By Colin Davis in Davis, *Haunted Subjects*, 147. For a full English translation of this essay see Derrida, "Rams: Uninterrupted Dialogue – Between Two Infinities, The Poem," 160.

son's partially deceased state. He is welcomed back with open arms, but on the proviso that it is never discussed, admitted or mentioned that he is not alive. Rick's father takes to the extreme the illusion that Rick is still a living human, whereas Kieren's family's seem to acknowledge that it is only pretence. Rick must force himself to drink alcohol (which makes him vomit violently) and to hunt the partially deceased in the woods with the Human Volunteer Force. Rick's father Bill is, in this sense, the embodiment of the death denial thesis discussed in chapter two. He not only avoids discussing his son's partially deceased status but outright refuses to acknowledge this as the truth. When Rick does reveal and identify himself by removing his make-up and contact lenses, his father kills him. He justifies this to himself by saying to his son: "Yer know something's not right and yer want out."<sup>196</sup> Though Bill does seem to love his son, his own extreme prejudice is beyond his control and he cannot tolerate or accept his son as partially deceased.

Over the course of the two seasons of *In the Flesh*, Kieren's family gradually shift from accepting their son only provisionally, to accepting him in his full alterity. Initially in series one, they seem to want to give him a warm if cautious welcome. When asked by Kieren if she wants him to stay, his mother expresses: 'My god Kieren, I'd love you with all my heart if you came back as a goldfish!'<sup>197</sup> By the end of season one, Kieren is positioned as being comfortable at home, welcomed and safe and having a sense of belonging in his family if not his community. Yet over the course of the second season of *In the Flesh* Kieren comes to acknowledge how inhospitable the community he has re-entered is toward him. A key turning point is when he witnesses the mistreatment of another partially deceased man in the community and challenges this, to be told by Gary, who is perpetrating the violence, that "you'd be amazed what I can do to your sort. And what you can do sod all about."<sup>198</sup> Kieren also reflects on the discrepancies in what is acceptable in terms of reminiscing about The Rising. The living share stories about the untreated partially deceased they killed and laugh and regale. The stories of the partially deceased, however, are unwelcome, as their victims were the living. Kieren shifts from viewing those undead who do not wear make-up as "causing trouble" to stopping wearing make-up himself.<sup>199</sup> Kieren's parents struggle with his new assertiveness and in particular his decision not to wear make-up or contact lenses. His father tells him: "I don't even recognise you anymore," to which Kieren responds, "this is who I am."<sup>200</sup> Kieren's family convince themselves that if they

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<sup>196</sup> *In the Flesh*, season one, episode three, dir. Jonny Campbell, March 31, 2013.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid.

<sup>198</sup> *In the Flesh*, season two, episode three, dir. Damon Thomas, May 18, 2014.

<sup>199</sup> *In the Flesh*, season two, episode one, dir. Jim O'Hanlon, May 4, 2014.

<sup>200</sup> *In the Flesh*, season two, episode five, dir. Alice Troughton, June 1, 2014.

return him to the treatment centre as a non-compliant partially deceased syndrome sufferer he will be restored to a version of himself that continues to maintain the illusion of being living, but they are evidently in denial about the violent and punitive treatment he would receive there. Kieren reassures his parents that “I’m not gonna do anything stupid okay.”<sup>201</sup> His father responds “You’ve said that before, then it all goes horribly wrong,” indirectly referring to Kieren’s suicide.<sup>202</sup> His father’s response is revealing, demonstrating that what motivates his parents is fear of what might happen to Kieren if he refuses to wear make-up or do as he is told in the community, rather than necessarily their own disgust at or fear of his undead self.

By the end of season two, the final season of *In the Flesh*, a clear parallel is drawn with the finale of season one, where Kieren feels welcome in his home conditionally, as long as he wears his make-up and maintains the guise of being living. By the end of season two, Kieren feels he belongs with his family as he is. Audiences see him looking in the mirror and smiling at himself without make-up or contact lenses. For Kieren, who admits that the people in the village pub hated him “even before” he was dead because of his sexuality, his difference, his sensitive personality and artistic talents, belonging within his family is sufficient even if his community do not accept him.<sup>203</sup> His family have shifted from accepting him conditionally to accepting him unconditionally, and this facilitates Kieren to finally accept himself. However even at a community level, change also occurs. The partially deceased live alongside the living, sharing the same spaces such as the local pub, though most choose to segregate themselves. The undead sit together and the living sit together. They tolerate each other, but each group expresses their distaste for the other. The community remains marked by factions and discomfort. The undead are also positioned as having to tolerate and exist alongside their other, the living, as they ponder the future and the possibility of a Second Rising that might allow them to attain a level of mastery. Here, Derrida’s notion that under conditions of “unconditional hospitality” any “mastery of your space, your home, your nation” would be given up are complicated by the fact that both groups are vying for mastery, neither willing to accept a future without their own mastery an option.<sup>204</sup>

The extent to which extending unconditional hospitality, in a Derridean sense, to the dead is taken to its most extreme in *The Fades*. In this series the living cannot extend to the dead

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<sup>201</sup> *In the Flesh*, season two, episode six, dir. Alice Troughton, June 8, 2014.

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>203</sup> *In the Flesh*, season one, episode two, dir. Jonny Campbell, March 24, 2013.

<sup>204</sup> Derrida, “Hospitality, justice and responsibility,” 70.

what they want – the opportunity to be alive again – because this would mean a sacrifice and a significant move toward undermining human exceptionalism, given they need to consume human blood or flesh to be alive again. Though the dead in this series exist as they do because of the living, and many of them sacrificed their own lives in war for the living, there is no willingness to return the favour. The dead are constructed as monsters for wanting to be alive again and being willing to kill for it. The level of sacrifice that would be required from the living to allow the dead to make themselves ‘at home’ resonates with Derrida’s view that to offer unconditional hospitality would be both “terrible” and “unbearable” even though “pure hospitality” would mean being “pushed to this extreme.”<sup>205</sup> The dead who failed to ascend in *The Fades* were forced to live an intolerable death, unable to touch, taste, communicate or be seen, and forced to witness the suffering and death of those they loved. In order to make their world a better place for them, they have to accept killing and consuming the living. Their leader John explains that “every nation has a bloody beginning. And now it’s time for a new nation, our nation.”<sup>206</sup> Like *In the Flesh*, *The Fades* imagines a world where the living and the dead are both vying for control in a way that draws parallels with global conflicts throughout human history. But whereas *In the Flesh* offers a world where, in the meantime, it is possible for the living and dead to co-exist, and some characters are committed to creating a tolerant world in which they can live alongside each other, *The Fades* imagines a world in which only one faction could feasibly survive, given that the dead sustain themselves through consuming the living. In this sense *The Fades* is akin to the more typical survival horror genre of zombie television. However, it subverts the conventions of that genre by giving the dead a voice and raising questions about whether the living are any less monstrous than the dead, or whether the living are any more entitled to inhabit the planet than the dead are.

What makes *The Fades* as a series especially interesting in terms of hospitality, and arguably so hopeless in what might be read as its overall message, comes in its conclusion. At the end of the six episodes of the only series, it is revealed that seeking to return the dead to ‘where they belong’ in the storyworld by fixing ascension is also what will destroy the planet once and for all by throwing off kilter any natural ecological balance. As such when the world is no longer remotely hospitable for the dead, it also becomes inhospitable for the living. Here the series might, like *In the Flesh*, be read as a social commentary. It is the actions of the living in disrupting the planet’s natural resources that mean the living are responsible for the circumstances that the

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<sup>205</sup> Ibid.

<sup>206</sup> *The Fades*, episode six, dir. Tom Shankland, October 26, 2011.

dead endure. Here the dead might be read as those who have suffered in the name of human ‘progress’ given it is the invention of concrete and the mass casualties of world wars that broke ascension and left the dead to suffer on earth in the world of *The Fades*. *The Fades* might also be understood not as the dead of the past but as those who are dying now as a consequence of the climate emergency and, as Derrida suggests, those who are “not yet *present and living*,” the future generations for whom the planet may be a highly inhospitable environment.<sup>207</sup> As discussed above, the responsibility of the living toward the dead emerges as a central theme, as does the failure of humanity to have held themselves accountable to either the dead of the past and present or to the future generations of those not yet living who will suffer as a consequence of decisions that have impacted the planet. In this sense, *The Fades* can also be read in terms of Khapaeva’s argument that in recent decades there has been a profound rejection of human exceptionalism and “a disillusionment with humanity” visible across a range of examples of popular and unpopular culture, as the consequences of humanity’s impact on the planet cause increasing concern.<sup>208</sup> This brief series imagines a fairly desolate world that may no longer be hospitable to either the living or the dead.

*Les Revenants* is primarily concerned, like *In the Flesh*, with the return of the dead to a small, rural community. The overall feel of the series is more supernatural than *In the Flesh* or *The Fades*, with no reason ever provided, biological, scientific or otherwise, for the return of the dead. The dead, in particular the young child Victor who it is revealed may be the product of one living and one dead parent, are also positioned as having returned before. There are a number of indications that it is the specific town in *Les Revenants* that is hospitable to the return of the dead. There is also, however, a suggestion that the town is, rather than especially hospitable to the return of the dead, not hospitable to the living. Across the course of the two seasons it is revealed that the history of the town is marked by floods, famine, murders and suicides. Throughout the first season, the water in the artificial, humanmade dam that is a feature of the town and that once burst nearly thirty years before, flooding the area and killing many, is seen to decrease despite no leak being found. One dead character suggests that the town is cursed. Dead animals feature heavily in the credit sequence as it is later revealed that local animals appears to be drowning themselves. Water is used in terms of both imagery and as a metaphor for life throughout the series, its absence or abundance both leading to inhospitable environments for life. The themes of human intervention in the natural world and environmental

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<sup>207</sup> Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, xviii. Italics in original.

<sup>208</sup> Khapaeva, *The Celebration of Death*, 1.



distress are not dissimilar to those in *The Fades*. Similar to the conclusion of *The Fades*, the final episode of the first season of *Les Revenants* also ends with ecological disaster. The town in *Les Revenants* floods again becoming, at least temporarily, wholly inhospitable to the living or the dead members of the town. Yet there is also the implication in *Les Revenants* that the town is the only place where the dead can live. When the living characters Julie and Laure attempt to leave with the dead child Victor, they find themselves caught in a never-ending loop and return on the bridge out of the town, never able to cross its boundaries. In the second series of *Les Revenants*, those who leave the town via the same route without any of the returned dead are able to leave, suggesting that the return of the dead is in some way tied to this particular geographical, and supernatural, place.

In a visual sense, the dead do sometimes appear out of place in *Les Revenants*. This is largely as a consequence of their sartorial outmodedness. Mrs. Costa has been dead for forty years. Her clothing, hairstyle and mannerisms are as dated as the numerous black and white posed photographs of her that adorn the walls of her widow Mr. Costa's apartment. This echoes Will Self's observation, discussed in chapter four, in which he noted that were his mother to return to the world of the living, it would be her clothes that would now be entirely out of place. This is emphasised in the final episode of the second season, in which dozens of the dead have collected together in a group that look visually striking due to their clothing and hairstyles all appearing to be from different decades, though none seeming to predate the twentieth century. This recalls the confusion of time that is central to the understanding of postmodernism put forward by Jameson, who suggests that when modernism ended "time itself" did too, as the styles of the past became the dominant aesthetic mode of the present.<sup>209</sup> Yet the fact that the dead look only slightly incongruous contributes to the eerie atmosphere of the series, described Mangan as "just a few degrees away from reality."<sup>210</sup> The dead occupants of the town seem to belong to a different time – because they do – but are not typically out of place visually as they are for much of *The Fades*, or like the dead are without make-up or contact lenses in *In the Flesh*. The geography of the town is hospitable to their return and perhaps too is the cultural moment, when their outmodedness is oddly appropriate.

One effect of this is to make it difficult for the living to identify who is dead and who is

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<sup>209</sup> Jameson, "The End of Temporality," 695.

<sup>210</sup> Lucy Mangan, "The Returned – Box Set Review," *The Guardian*, February 20, 2014, accessed June 23, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2014/feb/20/the-returned-box-set-review-french-drama>

alive, or to police the boundaries between the living and the dead. Gradually, divisions do emerge, as they do in *In the Flesh*, between the living and the dead in *Les Revenants*. Season one sees the living and the dead segregate, though some of the living choose to remain with the dead. Families are forced apart as the dead demand their own kind be returned to them. By the second series of *Les Revenants*, the dead are living in a secret, hidden development within the landscape of *Les Revenant's* storyworld. By the final episode of the second and final season, it is revealed that the dead must separate from the living. If they remain with them, they will begin to decay and deteriorate into flesh eating zombies. Camille, the first returned dead that audiences meet, explains that being around the living always leads to her beginning to rot. The co-existence of the living and the dead is positioned here as totally incompatible, but rather than the dead only posing a threat to the living, the dead would also suffer from being with the living. If the dead stay with their loved ones they will deteriorate and eventually, they will crave flesh, an outcome made all too clear in season two when the character of Audrey is seen eating the body of her mother, whose loss she was not long ago mourning. Yet other families are given opportunities for the goodbyes they did not have a chance to have when their loved ones died. Camille has the opportunity for tearful goodbye with her family, whom she reassures: "I'll be happy where I am going."<sup>211</sup> It is unclear, however, whether the inability of the dead and the living to co-exist is inevitable, or a consequence of the living's inability to accept them. The series, as Mumford has suggested, remains "beguiling and baffling to the very end."<sup>212</sup>

One of the ways in which the living fail to offer true, unconditional hospitality in a Derridean sense to the dead in *Les Revenants* is by demanding things from them. As Derrida explains, unconditional hospitality would mean that the other does not have "to give anything back."<sup>213</sup> In *Les Revenants* the living demand answers from the dead. Though the dead have no memory of what it was to be dead and can offer no insight into why they came back, they are inundated with questions by the living. The consequences of demanding something from the dead are severe in *Les Revenants*, and this is shown when Camille, who remembers nothing of her time as a dead person, feels pressured to console the living parents of another child who died along with her. She tells them that their son is in a happy place, waiting for them, and describes a beautiful afterlife. In response, they take their own lives by hanging in order to be with their dead son. Consolation is positioned as far from straightforward and when the living

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<sup>211</sup> *Les Revenants*, season two, episode eight, "The Returned," dir. Fabrice Gobert and Frédéric Goupil, October 19, 2015.

<sup>212</sup> Gwilym Mumford, "The Returned recap: episode eight – The Returned," *The Guardian*, December 6, 2015, accessed June 23, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2015/dec/06/the-returned-recap-episode-eight-the-returned>

<sup>213</sup> Derrida, "Hospitality, justice and responsibility," 70.

demand things from the dead that they cannot provide, the outcome is undesirable for both the living and the dead.

The dead in *In the Flesh*, and to some degree in *Les Revenants*, are all expected to behave in particular ways, and to conform to the ways in which the living remember them. Their alterity is not respected. In *The Fades*, respecting the alterity of the dead would be suicide for the living given they survive on human flesh. Though in *Les Revenants* and in *In the Flesh*, and in the many iterations of the premise of *Les Revenants* that now seem to be emerging, some hospitality is extended to the dead, but this hospitality is always conditional. Though the emphasis in these series is on living with the dead and as such, they seem to adhere to Derrida's demand that we learn to "live *with* ghosts," the challenges of doing so "justly," as Derrida advises, are explored, but never close to resolved.<sup>214</sup> If engagement with death and the dead continues to flourish in late postmodern culture in the way which this thesis argues it currently does, then we might soon be confronted with creative worlds in which the possibility of being open to the risks of an unconditional hospitality are also more thoroughly explored. *The Fades* arguably already gives a dystopian imagining of how desolate such worlds might be.

All three series share an evident concern with exploring what the dead coming back could look like, from their return to an Alpine community in France in *Les Revenants* to a village in rural Lancashire in *In the Flesh* and an urban town in England in *The Fades*. All three can be read as commenting on the relationship between the self and the other, as attempts to 'make sense' of death and the place of the dead in the lives of the living, and of the responsibility of the living toward the dead. Each is arguably an example of how hospitable popular culture has become to varied and sustained engagement with death and the dead, whilst each can also be read itself as exploring, among other themes, the theme of hospitality, considering the extent to which the worlds imagined in each text are hospitable to the return of the dead. These three examples, as discussed above in relation to *Les Revenants* and its many direct or indirect adaptations and offshoots, sit amongst a much broader and diverse range of television series concerned with the return of the dead, as well as films, videogames and other visual media premised on the dead returning. As this chapter has argued, the current climate is one especially hospitable to the return of the dead in part because of the preponderance of visual media that characterises it. That some of the televisual texts that emerge within this climate are also

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<sup>214</sup> Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, xviii. Italics in original.

thematically concerned with the ways in which their imagined storyworlds might respond to the return of the dead is itself indicative of what may be a broader cultural concern with themes of hospitality, the return of the dead and the possibility of the living and the dead living alongside each other in late postmodern culture.

## Conclusion

This chapter has examined how the dead return in late postmodern culture via visual media and has considered some of the reasons for why they might be returning. The three series discussed here all imagine the possibilities and consequences of the return of the dead in a culture that seems broadly fascinated with such a phenomenon. They consider it in terms of the practical realities of the dead returning, the ethical responsibilities that the living might have toward the dead, and in terms of how the dead themselves might experience coming back. Each opens up what Penfold-Mounce has called a “provocative morbid space” in which audiences can contend with and negotiate ideas about death, the dead, grief, loss, and the self.<sup>215</sup> Each series imagines a way in which the living self could go on after death, what that might look like, whether it would be desirable, and how the living might manage such a scenario, and each series facilitates engagement with death and the dead from within the home (or indeed elsewhere). Where the questions they raise are practical, they are also philosophical, as they might prompt consideration of what it would really mean to welcome in the other and be responsible toward them, or to extend an unconditional hospitality. According to Shaw, Derrida tells us that “it is our duty to note how and why specters rupture the present and our ethical responsibility to listen to and live with them.”<sup>216</sup> This thesis has offered a range of reasons for why the dead might be so at home in the present, even if the hospitality extended to them has been conditional. They are brought back via new technologies, welcomed in a consumer culture voraciously seeking new content but simultaneously, as hauntology tells us, obsessed with the past. They are conjured up by the living’s desire to keep on being after death as some form of what Kearl calls a ‘postself.’<sup>217</sup> They come back because of unfinished business or a symbolic debt they need to pay, or they come back because the living manifest them through a process of mourning. They return because of the strength of current cultural impulses to give voice to the dispossessed and marginalised. Evidently, the dead come back because the living bring them back, and in vast quantities. The texts examined here, like those examined in chapter four, are emblematic of a

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<sup>215</sup> Penfold-Mounce, *Death, the Dead and Popular Culture*, 79.

<sup>216</sup> Shaw, *Hauntology*, 13.

<sup>217</sup> Kearl, “The Proliferation of Postselves.”

broader engagement with death and the dead in late postmodern culture as they can be seen to negotiate what it might mean to acknowledge, account for and live with the dead.

## Conclusion

*So there must be melancholia*  
Jacques Derrida<sup>1</sup>

Simon Reynolds has written that “instead of being about itself, the 2000s has been about every other previous decade happening all at once.”<sup>2</sup> This resonates with much that has been discussed in this thesis and can be read as suggestive of one of the core arguments made here, which is that late postmodern culture offers an environment that is especially hospitable to engagement with the past and, consequently, to engagement with death and the dead. A confusion of time is central to the understanding of postmodernism put forward by Jameson, who suggests that when modernism ended “time itself” did too, as the aesthetics and artistic modes of the past began to encroach upon the present.<sup>3</sup> A confusion of time is discussed by Derrida, who in *Specters of Marx* observes how in relation to mourning time becomes “out of joint.”<sup>4</sup> Barnes and others have suggested that a confusion of time might bring the dead back, making memory a powerful vehicle for transporting the dead into the present, or the living into the past. As Diski writes, this might be “the dead haunting the living, or the living haunting the dead.”<sup>5</sup> A blending of time and bringing of the past into the present is visible in the very structure of Diski’s *In Gratitude*, which shifts around in time, and in the televisual narratives examined in chapter five that bring the dead and the past into the present. Television itself, as Charles writes, dissolves “the distance between the past and the present.”<sup>6</sup> The lingering of the past can be felt in relation to the death denial thesis, its roots firmly in the twentieth century but its legacy still strong. It can be seen in the ways that the dead of the past continue to be prolific in the present. A confusion of time is in some ways reflected in the grammar of this thesis, which like much writing adopts the present tense when referring to the work of those both long and recently deceased, emphasising that though they may not be alive, their voice remains active in shaping and influencing the worlds of the living. Reynolds writes that “instead of being the threshold to the future, the first ten years of the twenty-first century turned out to be the ‘Re’ Decade,” as “the 2000s were dominated by the ‘re’ prefix: revivals, reissues, remakes, re-enactments. Endless

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Béliers. Le Dialogue ininterrompu: entre deux infinis, le poème.” (Paris: Galilée, 2003). Section trans. By Colin Davis in Davis, *Haunted Subjects*, 147. For a full English translation of this essay with the perhaps less eloquent rendering of this fragment as “Melancholy is therefore necessary,” see Jacques Derrida, “Rams: Uninterrupted Dialogue – Between Two Infinities, The Poem,” trans. Thomas Dutoit and Philippe Romanski, in Thomas Dutoit and Outi Pasanen, eds. *Sovereignities in Question: The Poetics of Paul Celan* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 160. Italics in original.

<sup>2</sup> Simon Reynolds, *Retromania: Pop Culture’s Addiction to its Own Past* (London: Faber, 2012), xi.

<sup>3</sup> Jameson, “The End of Temporality,” 695.

<sup>4</sup> As mentioned in chapter five, Shakespeare’s “This time is Out of Joint” from *Hamlet* is the epigraph to Derrida, *Specters of Marx*.

<sup>5</sup> Diski, *In Gratitude*, 212.

<sup>6</sup> Charles, “The ideology of anachronism,” 114.

retrospection.”<sup>7</sup> We might add to the list *resurrection*, given that death and the dead have, in a range of ways, taken centre stage, both in the televisual narratives examined in chapter five and via the myriad visual technologies that facilitate their preponderance in late postmodern culture.

This thesis has argued that there is a notable impulse to engage with both death and the dead in the present moment, a moment complicated by and engaged with the past and defined here as late postmodern culture. The late in late postmodern culture, as detailed in chapter one, has a wide range of connotations relating to death. It also indicates a sense of being, as explained by Said, “full of memory, and also very (even preternaturally) aware of the present.”<sup>8</sup> Given the conflation of past and present that this thesis argues late postmodern culture is marked by, it is not positioned here as a discreet epoch or part of a progressive or linear trajectory. It is an inevitably partial term but hopefully also a useful one, built on the foundations of the work of others discussed throughout this thesis. It gives name to a set of social, cultural and political conditions marked by death, loss and obsolescence and hospitable to the presence of, and to engagement with, death and the dead.

The ways in which late postmodern culture is hospitable to both the presence of and engagement with death and the dead are central to its character. Hospitality toward the dead is threaded into the dynamics of a consumerist capitalist culture, in which new opportunities have arisen for representing death and the dead in fiction, film, television, art, fashion, advertising and more. As chapter one examined in particular, the coupling of postmodernism’s high tolerance for contradiction, difference and voices from the margins with capitalism’s inclusion of everything into the market has produced an environment in which engagement with death and the dead can flourish. A concern with the primacy of the self and with autobiographical accounts has made late postmodern culture a hospitable environment for autothanatography, and the myriad ways in which visual and digital media can facilitate the return of the dead has produced fertile ground for both the development of a diversity of visual narratives focused on death and the dead and for what Blanco and Peeren have described as a “ghostly entropy” embedded into the contours of the everyday.<sup>9</sup> The extent to which the current moment is hospitable to engagement with death and the dead is also of thematic concern in the texts examined here.

The popularity of the literary, theoretical and televisual engagement with death and the

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<sup>7</sup> Reynolds, *Retromania*, xi. Italics in original.

<sup>8</sup> Said, *On Late Style*, 13-14.

<sup>9</sup> Blanco and Peeren, “Introduction,” xiii.

dead examined here suggests that the contemporary *zeitgeist* is hospitable to such engagement. However, the autothanatographical writing examined in chapter four offered a wide range of perspectives on the ways in which the dead are both welcome and unwelcome, present and yet absent, and perpetuated and denied in the lives and experiences of the authors writing there. Chapter five examined the ways in which visual media can give a voice to the dead and in particular three televisual narratives in which the dead return, not in post-apocalyptic survival horror, but into imagined worlds that are remarkably similar to those of their audiences. The three television series all explore the ways in which those imagined worlds might contend with the return of the dead, with the analysis offered focusing on the ways in which the hospitality afforded to the dead in those narratives is, in a Derridean sense, only conditional. So, though this thesis argues that the current moment is one hospitable to the dead, in a number of ways it is arguably only conditionally hospitable. Yet death and the dead are also central to a range of sometimes compatible and sometimes conflicting theory emanating from different disciplines and are visible in writing, on television, in popular and unpopular culture, and in practical movements. As chapter three concludes, death and the dead inform, structure and rupture the lives of the living. This conclusion will briefly revisit the approach adopted, before reiterating the central arguments raised in this thesis by deploying examples, first in relation to death, and second in relation to the dead.

The thesis has been situated as a contribution to the field of death studies. The approach adopted has been aligned with the humanities, a broad disciplinary umbrella that Bullough has suggested can be “helpfully troubling.”<sup>10</sup> It has been utilised here to trouble ideas about the position of death and the dead in contemporary culture and the received wisdom that death is denied. When discussing the role of the humanities, Churchwell has written:

The humanities are the study of what makes us human, of what it means to be human. As they penetrate every aspect of existence, they can, and should, intersect with the natural and social sciences, but literature, history, art, music, languages, theatre, film – and yes, television and computer games – are the stories and ideas through which we express our humanity.<sup>11</sup>

Churchwell gestures toward debates that have been addressed here about what constitutes ‘meaningful’ human engagement. This conclusion will come back later to the positioning of television in particular as a space deemed insufficiently serious to provoke meaningful engagement with death and the dead. Churchwell also hints at the importance of story and narrative to meaning

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<sup>10</sup> Bullough, “Developing Interdisciplinary Researchers,” 8.

<sup>11</sup> Sarah Churchwell, “why the humanities matter,” *Times Higher Education*, November 13, 2014, accessed June 23, 2020, <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/comment/opinion/sarah-churchwell-why-the-humanities-matter/2016909.article>



making processes, something which chapter three considered in relation to death, others and the self. She suggests the humanities should intersect with other umbrella disciplines such as the natural and social sciences because the humanities are concerned with every aspect of what it is to be human, but also emphasises the unique contribution of the humanities in their focus on the stories, material culture, ideas, and indeed language, through which human experience is expressed, negotiated and shared.

In seeking to bring a range of understandings from different disciplines to bear on both the conceptualisation of late postmodern culture and the texts and ideas examined here, a number of challenges have been encountered. Without being immersed in each of the disciplines from which perspectives have been drawn, there has perhaps been a greater risk of misinterpretation than might have presented itself in a more singularly disciplined study. The scope has not always allowed for a thorough teasing out of differences, compatibilities and incompatibilities between different viewpoints, or a consideration of tensions within and between disciplines on such complex topics as death and the dead. As emphasised in the introduction, disciplines are themselves constructed, contested and complex, their boundaries movable, debated and policed. In seeking to align this thesis with the field of death studies as an interdisciplinary formation that, it has been argued here, can benefit from the presence of the humanities and approaches aligned with the humanities, attempts have been made to acknowledge the benefits of interdisciplinary endeavours whilst also acknowledging that there are inevitably a number of challenges and pitfalls that accompany such undertakings.

Postmodernism and its writings have been central to the definition of late postmodern culture offered here and a wide range of the texts engaged with might be described as postmodern in terms of media and structure as well as in terms of their content and central concerns. Writing and approaches associated with deconstruction have also been particularly prominent. Deconstruction is perhaps in some ways more complex than postmodernism. Derrida, often referred to as the ‘father’ of deconstruction, wrote in 1995 that he “never stopped having doubts about the very identity of what is referred to by such a nickname.”<sup>12</sup> Yet according to Davis, due to its explicit concern with haunting, with undoing and uncovering meaning and with mourning, deconstruction can itself “be understood as the desire to speak with the dead.”<sup>13</sup> An approach has been adopted

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<sup>12</sup> Jacques Derrida, “This Time is Out of Joint,” in *Deconstruction Is/In America: A New Sense of the Political*, ed. Anselm Haverkamp (New York and London: New York University Press, 1995), 15.

<sup>13</sup> Davis, *Haunted Subjects*, 75.

here that has sought to situate theory as a part of culture rather than outside of it. The recent interest in and development of a wealth of theory in different disciplines that share a concern with continued relationships with the dead and the place of the dead in culture are emblematic of the desire to engage with death and the dead that this thesis argues is core to the present moment. Julian Able, a palliative care consultant, has argued that “death is all of our responsibility. All of us can help with the people around us, professionals are essential but not central.”<sup>14</sup> This suggests the need for broad discussions about death and the dead as well as more discrete ones, for practical and professional conversations but also for provocative, open-ended and theoretical conversations, ones that the introduction to this thesis argues the humanities are particularly capable of prompting. Eagleton has argued that cultural theory has in recent years “acted as a kind of dumping ground for those embarrassingly large topics off-loaded by a narrowly analytical philosophy, an empiricist sociology and a positivist political science.”<sup>15</sup> The kind of enquiries that Eagleton critiques as ‘narrow,’ ‘empiricist’ or ‘positivist’ are vital. However, so are approaches that embrace the “embarrassingly large,” that seek to explore the myriad ways in which death and the dead permeate culture, and the ways in which understandings of death intersect with understandings of the self and the other.<sup>16</sup>

The phrase ‘making sense’ has been utilised throughout as a way to structure the approach taken. The thesis has sought to ‘make sense,’ and the texts (literary, televisual, theoretical, artistic) examined here have been positioned as attempts to, among other things, themselves ‘make sense’ of death and the dead. The intention has been to position ‘making sense’ as a process, one that is always active, ongoing, interminable, and in some ways incommunicable (in line with the deconstructionist and postmodernist understandings of language and the self examined in chapter three). Davis’s contention that “theory emerges out of the possibly deluded project of making sense of ourselves and others,” and that it is both “haunted, and driven, by the inevitability of its failure and the necessity of carrying on,” has guided this approach.<sup>17</sup> Eagleton has similarly argued that “theory is always in some ultimate sense a self-defeating enterprise.”<sup>18</sup> Though it emerges in “the moment when a practice begins to curve back upon itself, so as to scrutinize its own conditions of possibility,” this task remains an impossible one because we cannot “pick ourselves up by our own

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<sup>14</sup> BBC, “Stand by me,” *We Need to Talk About Death*, accessed September 12, 2019, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b083pd1p>

<sup>15</sup> Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, 206.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Davis, *After Poststructuralism*, 177.

<sup>18</sup> Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, 190.

bootstraps” or “examine our life-forms” from a perspective of “clinical detachment.”<sup>19</sup> Despite this, theory continues to proliferate and to be translated into and developed at the site of culture. This is, perhaps, because seeking to ‘make sense,’ of ourselves, of others, and of our environments, is central to human experience.

## Death

The idea that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism has been revisited at numerous occasions throughout this thesis with reference to Jameson, Žižek and Fisher. In experimental filmmaker Andrew Köting’s *Lek and the Dogs* (2018), graphic novelist Alan Moore elegantly reformulates this idea. He suggests that “it’s easier to think about the apocalypse, the end of the planet, than it is to think about the end of our own lives.”<sup>20</sup> Though the breadth of post-apocalyptic survival horror narratives on offer across a range of media may attest to this, chapter five also suggests that a range of televisual narratives exist that are more concerned with creating what Penfold-Mounce has referred to as “provocative morbid spaces,” in which audiences are given the opportunity to consider the loss of their own selfhood and to think about their own demise and those of their loved ones, as well as more broadly about death and the dead.<sup>21</sup> The autothanatography examined in chapter four also suggests that a market for writing about death on a very personal level exists and that explicit attempts to imagine one’s own death, as Jenny Diski does, can attract a popular readership. Though as Alan Moore suggests it is perhaps “easier” to think about the end of the world than the end of our own lives, late postmodern culture offers a highly hospitable environment for texts that prompt thinking about both of these scenarios, and televisual narratives like *The Fades* arguably prompt the opportunity to think about the ways in which the two occurrences may coincide or collide.<sup>22</sup>

As chapter one argues, the conditions of late postmodern culture have in a range of ways provided a hospitable environment and fertile ground for engagement with death and the dead. A 2019 project titled *The Departure Lounge*, supported by the Wellcome Trust and created by the Academy of Medical Sciences, was an installation that coincided with UK Dying Matters week and was held in Lewisham, home of the hospice movement.<sup>23</sup> It was aimed at engendering conversation about the end of our own lives. The project sought to “start a conversation about the end of life and

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Alan Moore in *Lek and the Dogs*, dir. Andrew Köting, Salon Pictures, 2018, Feature Film.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>22</sup> Alan Moore in *Lek and the Dogs*, dir. Andrew Köting, Salon Pictures, 2018, Feature Film.

<sup>23</sup> The Academy of Medical Sciences, “The Departure Lounge,” *The Academy of Medical Sciences*, accessed July 8, 2019, <https://acmedsci.ac.uk/policy/policy-projects/the-departure-lounge>

how we can support people to have a ‘good death’ in the future.”<sup>24</sup> Mimicking the aesthetic of a travel agency and set up inside a shopping centre, the installation is emblematic of the way in which death can be ‘at home’ and built into the structures of a capitalist, consumerist culture, and how the tenets of such a culture might be exploited in terms of creating a highly hospitable environment for conversations about death and dying. You can borrow a flat pack version of the installation to set up in your own community. The project website has a colourful aesthetic and an emphasis on sharing stories and sharing your own story, in line with what chapter three argues is the current tendency toward utilising story and narrative as a way for thinking about life, death and the self.

Katherine Sleeman, a palliative care consultant at the Cicely Saunders Institute at King’s College London and a member of the advisory group that set up The Departure Lounge, explains that “people call [death] the last taboo, but that’s not my experience. Healthcare professionals can be fearful about raising the subject, but I find patients are often relieved when it’s mentioned. They know they’re dying, and they want to talk about it.”<sup>25</sup> The Departure Lounge does not seek only to prompt conversations but to incorporate the views of the public into policy. As such the project recognises what Zimmerman and Rodin have pointed out when they emphasise that “changing the ‘attitude’ towards dying” by promoting conversation would be insufficient to address the challenges experienced by those dying and their carers or by those experiencing bereavement.<sup>26</sup> The project is indicative of the ways in which death is high on the academic and public agenda, receiving research funding and media attention. In its focus on sharing stories, it is emblematic of the ways in which an emphasis on narrative has penetrated thinking about death, and in its mimicking of a travel shop inside a shopping centre, of the ways in which the structures of a capitalist, consumer culture can be (at least conditionally) hospitable to engagement with death.

An appetite for engagement with death and an environment hospitable to it are also visible in recent books by medical doctors such as Kathryn Mannix’s *With the End in Mind: How to Live and Die Well* (2017) and Seamus O’Mahony’s *The Way We Die Now* (2016) and before them, popular books by a range of other medical professionals and scientists including Atul Gawande and Oliver Sacks. Mannix is a palliative care consultant who offers readers the opportunity to “accompany dying strangers across the pages” of her book, which draws on her experience to offer lessons about

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<sup>24</sup> The Academy of Medical Sciences, “About The Departure Lounge,” *The Academy of Medical Sciences*, accessed July 8, 2019, <https://www.departure-lounge.org/about/>

<sup>25</sup> Katherine Sleeman in Joanna Moorhead, “Welcome to the Departure Lounge. Destination: Death,” *The Observer*, May 5, 2019, accessed June 23, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2019/may/05/welcome-to-the-deaprture-lounge-destination-death>

<sup>26</sup> Zimmerman and Rodin, “The denial of death thesis,” 127.

life and death.<sup>27</sup> The book is marketed as a self-help manual, most evidently in its subtitle ‘how to live and die well,’ and includes a template letter for writing to friends and loved ones with messages you might want to share with them before your death. Once more, there is a focus on sharing stories. There is a list of useful resources at the end, referring readers to a range of well-established organisations such as Dying Matters and Cruse Bereavement Care as well as to death cafés. Mannix introduces the book with the idea that “death itself has become increasingly taboo” and asserts that in the absence of personal experience of death in the home, “people take their cues instead from vicarious experience: television, films, novels, social media and the news,” resources which, she perceives, offer “sensationalised yet simultaneously trivialised versions of dying and death.”<sup>28</sup> Her introduction tends to venerate autobiography over other genres of writing without considering the tensions between such genres. If novels constitute vicarious experience that is sensationalised and trivialised, then her own stories of witnessing death and dying are positioned as more valuable, more serious, more honest. As this thesis has sought to reinforce from the outset, television, films, novels, social media and the news are all valid media through which people can ‘make sense’ of their experiences.

Mannix’s perspective is similar to that discussed in the introduction, expressed by Wittkowski *et al.*, who argue that “especially on TV,” there is no “serious consideration of mortality.”<sup>29</sup> Such arguments undermine how powerful, cathartic and valuable representations of death and dying can be across different media. Though the representation of death and the dead in television is of course vastly varied across and within genres, protracted portrayals of those dying of terminal illnesses on television have been hailed for their “realism”<sup>30</sup> and for being “empowering.”<sup>31</sup> These responses refer respectively to the very different deaths, both at home from cancer, of Buffy’s mother in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2001), who dies alone at home believing she is in remission, and Abby in *Ray Donovan* (2013-present), who chooses to end her own life rather than continue treatment.<sup>32</sup> Both series spend numerous seasons representing terminal illness, considering mortality and exploring the repercussions of profound loss. The popularity of very recent

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<sup>27</sup> Kathryn Mannix, *With The End in Mind: How to Live and Die Well* (London: William Collins, 2018), 1.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Wittkowski *et al.*, “Publication Trends in Thanatology,” 454.

<sup>30</sup> Catherine Gee, “The best Buffy the Vampire Slayer episodes: the story behind The Body,” March 10, 2017, accessed June 23, 2020, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/tv/0/best-buffy-vampire-slayer-episodes-story-behind-body/>

<sup>31</sup> Danielle Turchiano, “‘Ray Donovan’ Boss on Abby’s ‘Empowering’ Death,” October 1, 2017, accessed June 23, 2020, <https://variety.com/2017/tv/news/ray-donovan-abby-death-cancer-1202575483/>

<sup>32</sup> *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*, created by Joss Whedon, The WB and UPN, 1997-2003, Television Series; *Ray Donovan*, created by Anne Biderman, Showtime, 2012-present, Television Series.

television series focused on bereavement, including *Dead to Me* (2019 -) and *After Life* (2019 -), also suggest there is a strong public interest in death driving commercial content.<sup>33</sup> As Davies has emphasised, “although the power of language, art and song underlying self-reflection makes grief all the more poignant, it also fosters our ability to cope with bereavement.”<sup>34</sup> Human expressions – be they written, visual, artistic, acoustic, or otherwise – can be meaningful and valuable ways of ‘making sense’ of death both for those who produce and those who consume them. However, as Barnes makes clear, “you can never prepare” for the experience of loss.<sup>35</sup> The three televisual examples focused on in chapter five bring the dead back in narratives that are explicitly engaged with contemplating themes including mortality, loss, community, responsibility, and the climate crisis. Their depictions of grieving families, negotiation or what it means to mourn, explorations of melancholia and interrogation of how hospitable or inhospitable the communities in their storyworlds might be to the return of the dead all constitute meaningful explorations of mortality, loss, the self and the other in an environment that, it is argued here, is hospitable to a breadth of varied, sometimes contradictory and often complex engagement with death and the dead.

Mannix echoes the death denial argument discussed in chapter two when she writes that “rich wisdom” about death and dying was “lost in the second half of the twentieth century.”<sup>36</sup> She paints a picture of “dying in a dear and familiar room with people we love around us,” contrasting this with how we “now die in ambulances and emergency rooms and intensive care units, our loved ones separated from us by the machinery of life preservation.”<sup>37</sup> Though this will of course reflect the experience of many, neither polarity has ever reflected the experience of all. The notion of death prior to the second half of the twentieth century as one of peace, surrounded by loved ones, is evidently made problematic by two world wars and centuries of violent deaths and short life expectancies. The argument made in chapter two that much engagement with death and dying needs to be justified in relation to a broader climate of denial might come into play here, as the marketing of the book may well have depended on its being positioned in this way. Mannix’s stories of how “the dying, like the rest of us, are mainly getting on with living” are moving and engaging.<sup>38</sup> Her argument that “it’s time to talk about dying” and positioning of her own book as a “way of promoting the conversation” support the broad argument of this thesis – that such an impulse to

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<sup>33</sup> *Dead to Me*, created by Liz Feldman, Netflix, 2019 – present, Television Series; *After Life*, created by Ricky Gervais, Netflix, 2019 – present, Television Series.

<sup>34</sup> Davies, *A Brief History of Death*, 89.

<sup>35</sup> Barnes, *Levels*, 69.

<sup>36</sup> Mannix, *With the End in Mind*, 1-2.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

talk about death is now highly prevalent.<sup>39</sup> The book was a *Sunday Times* bestseller, suggesting that there is plenty of public interest in reading about death. It offers one more example of explicit and consumable engagement with death and dying marketed to a popular audience, demonstrating how the structures of contemporary capitalism can accommodate such engagement and provide a hospitable environment for it. As a text based on personal experience and emphasising individual narratives and stories, it is also emblematic of the current emphasis on the self, the authority of individual experience, and on the self as narrative that chapter three argues is so prevalent in late postmodern culture.

Seamus O'Mahony's *The Way We Die Now* (2016), the title taken from Anthony Trollope's *The Way We Live Now* (1875), takes a different approach, in many ways in conflict with Mannix's. Like Trollope's nineteenth century novel, O'Mahony's book reflects an evident disdain for the current way of things. It is certainly more pessimistic, or perhaps more pragmatic, than Mannix's, and sheds light on a range of the central themes examined in this thesis. O'Mahony suggests (perhaps wrongly) that "doctors and nurses rarely write about death" and that "those who do are generally palliative care (hospice) specialists, and have a particular perspective on the subject," one that he does "not completely share."<sup>40</sup> This is largely because O'Mahony takes a critical stance toward the notion of dying with dignity, one central to palliative care and the hospice movement. He claims "'death with dignity' may simply reflect an aspiration on the part of those witnessing death, for less mess, less odour."<sup>41</sup> He suggests it may also be "yet another manifestation of our unwillingness to accept meaninglessness, both of life and of death," and an example of the way in which the human species has come to "believe that everything that happens to us – including death – is our fault, our doing, our responsibility."<sup>42</sup> O'Mahony argues that the notion is:

informed by the modern view of each human life as a story – a 'narrative'. This concept has a powerful hold on the modern imagination, but may be a delusion. We are not one, but many selves [...] It must be a terrible burden on the dying person to 'die in character', and by extrapolation, with 'dignity'. What if your dying day happens to be an 'off' day?<sup>43</sup>

As argued in chapter three, neoliberal understandings of the self as controllable and malleable, especially when combined with personal and social imperatives to make a narrative of one's life, have significant consequences for thinking about death. The notions of a 'good death' and 'dying with dignity' are refashioned by O'Mahony in negative terms, positioned as an unnecessary burden

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Seamus O'Mahony, *The Way We Die Now* (London: Head of Zeus, 2017), ix-x.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 263-264.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 265.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

based on an understanding of the self as unified and uncomplicated. The tensions between O'Mahony's perspective and those expressed by Mannix and in the project *The Departure Lounge*, which has an emphasis on the notion of a 'good death,' albeit situating this as a concept that might be unique to the individual, are clear. These tensions reflect the ways in which, while engagement with death in late postmodern culture is rife, perspectives on death within late postmodern culture are in no way uniform. Late postmodern culture is certainly not unique in offering a climate in which a diversity of opinions on death and the dead can exist, but it is perhaps unique in offering an environment so hospitable to the dissemination of these ideas in online and print publications, on television and radio, in fictional narratives, in the news and in film, in texts focused on personal experience and in author's own autobiographical accounts. Though there are evidently still a range of challenges to be contended with in terms of whose voices are most amplified and those that are neglected or undermined, the structures of capitalism, consumerism and technology have produced an environment conducive to a plurality of both perspectives on and engagement with death and the dead.

Like Mannix, O'Mahony paints a romantic picture of death in the past. He draws heavily on Ariès and claims "we used to have a common script for dying."<sup>44</sup> In the past, "the dying and their attendants knew how to *do it*."<sup>45</sup> Here O'Mahony too perhaps underplays the multitude of unattended, violent, complicated and unexpected deaths experienced throughout human history. He claims that now, we have been "forced to write our own script" and that "illness memoirs and blogs written by the dying have a popular appeal because people want to know how to compose this script."<sup>46</sup> Here O'Mahony echoes the points made in chapter four about the ways in which the cancer diary has become quotidian, as individuals diarise their experiences for others' consumption and as part of their own process of 'making sense.' O'Mahony is critical of this, seeing the appeal of such work as an example of the need to adopt another's script. He suggests there is "something studied and self-congratulatory – even narcissistic – about all this, as there is with the modern clamour for 'death with dignity'" and he questions the extent to which the "thousand scripts you can choose from" and the "cacophony of voices" by those "blogging, penning memoirs and newspaper columns" as well as those "dying online" are actually read and consumed by "those who live in the Kingdom of the Well?"<sup>47</sup> O'Mahony positions one script as superior to a multiplicity of scripts and voices, the latter of which can be associated with postmodernism, yet acknowledges that death is

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid. Italics in original.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.



being talked about and engaged with, even if not in quite the way he would like, or even perhaps, as he suggests, by the people he would like. Yet the “cacophony of voices” that O’Mahony identifies is perhaps also more evidence of the ways in which the current moment is hospitable to a multiplicity of different perspectives, narratives and ideas about death and the dead.<sup>48</sup>

Writing as an Irishman working in Ireland, O’Mahony believes his observations are applicable to “developed countries in general” and, in contrast to those who still deem Ireland to have distinct and quite different attitudes to dying and mourning as mentioned in chapter two, O’Mahony views Ireland as a country where “the churches have emptied, and people no longer know how to die, or how to mourn.”<sup>49</sup> The rise of secularism is evidently central for O’Mahony, as is the rapid social change that he claims has left Ireland “reeling.”<sup>50</sup> He describes what he calls a “late period of doubt and uncertainty,” echoing facets of the definition of late postmodern culture given in chapter one.<sup>51</sup> “Modern scientific medicine,” he argues, “for all its achievements, has never been so unsure of itself.”<sup>52</sup> He wonders if the “perceived ‘problem’ with death” could be “partly due to the fact that, after decades of our culture being dominated by individualism and consumerism, our respect for other people has diminished?”<sup>53</sup> He implies here a connection between attitudes toward the living and those toward the dead, signalling arguments considered throughout this thesis, in particular in chapters three, four and five, about the responsibility of the self toward the other, living or dead. On the whole, O’Mahony seems to acknowledge that death is on the agenda in the current moment, but he is critical of the ways in which that conversation is being led, and argues that “the conversation about death and dying needs to be reclaimed” because “death is too important to be left to the death specialists.”<sup>54</sup> This perspective reinforces the importance of public engagement and also supports the argument made here that death research should not be dominated by one or a handful of disciplines, but open to disciplinary and interdisciplinary contributes from a wide range of different perspectives.

There is ample evidence of recent engagement with death in the contemporary moment, even when that engagement is positioned as a response to a broader climate of death denial. Engagement with death can be located in a host of different genres, media, projects and initiatives,

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 271.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 270.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 271.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., x.

and in calls for public conversation. In this thesis, autothanatographical and televisual engagement has been the focus of the analysis, explored both in terms of how these genres and media of engagement demonstrate the ways in which late postmodern culture is hospitable to death and the dead, and also thematically in terms of their arguably late postmodern concerns with the self, the other, giving a voice to the dead, responsibility, accountability and hospitality. Views about death and the treatment of the dying are far from monolithic, with competing viewpoints proliferating. Penfold-Mounce argues that in popular culture, “death is embraced, every day and as ultimately inevitable.”<sup>55</sup> This thesis has explored how death and the dead are also embraced, engaged with and negotiated in a range of spaces both within and beyond popular culture. As Jacobsen has argued, there has been a “revival of interest in death, dying and bereavement, professionally, politically, publicly and personally, which renders problematic the notions of taboo, denial and disappearance.”<sup>56</sup> This revival of interest can be seen in theory, in the academic field of death studies, at a broad range of cultural coordinates and in a multitude of media. This is a consequence both of a public interest in engaging with death and the dead, and a consequence of the confluence of capitalism and postmodernism in their late stages offering a hospitable environment for such engagement.

### **The Dead**

Where it has been argued here that there is clear evidence of engagement with death in late postmodern culture, it has also been emphasised that there is ample evidence of the presence of, and a desire to commune with, the dead in an environment that is especially hospitable to such engagement for a range of structural and cultural reasons. What is perhaps remarkable, though not inherently original, about engagement with the dead in late postmodern culture is the widespread tendency to offer anti-consolatory messages as evidenced in chapters four, focused on auto thanatography, and five, focused on televisual narratives, of this thesis. As examined in chapter one, the conditions of late postmodern culture can be understood as melancholic in terms of the ‘turn’ that took place around 1990 when postmodernism’s relationship to capitalism made it a disappointment for so many. However, it is also argued in chapter one that these melancholic contours are in part what make late postmodern culture especially hospitable to engagement with death and the dead. This thesis has shown that late postmodern culture might be understood as melancholic in terms of a productive or generative melancholy. Freud’s early conception of melancholia, which cast it as pathological, positioned it as “complicated” and marked by

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<sup>55</sup> Penfold-Mounce, *Death, the Dead and Popular Culture*, 88.

<sup>56</sup> Jacobsen, “Spectacular Death,” 19.

“ambivalence.”<sup>57</sup> Eng and Kazanjian explain that Freud conceptualises melancholia as a condition in which “the past is neither fixed nor complete,” remaining “steadfastly alive in the present.”<sup>58</sup> Late postmodern culture is, in this sense, melancholic, given that the past seems to be so present within it. Much of the engagement with death and the dead discussed also seems to challenge the notion that the characteristics of classical definitions of melancholia are pathological. The television series *In the Flesh* and *Les Revenants* in particular, along with the autothanatographical writing of Julian Barnes, are especially explicit in their complicating of notions of ‘healthy’ and ‘unhealthy’ mourning and suggestive of the productive, generative powers of a melancholic relation to the dead. As Klass, Silverman and Nickman have written, both historically and in the present moment, “a diagnosis of pathological grief or complicated mourning has been one of [...] society’s ways of enforcing the view that bonds must be severed.”<sup>59</sup> Their theory of continuing bonds put forward in the late 1990s, discussed in chapters four and five, seeks to normalise ongoing relationships between the living and the dead. Such relationships “can be described as interactive, even though the other person is physically absent.”<sup>60</sup> In acknowledging and placing into a framework the notion that ongoing and interactive relationships between the living and the dead are not pathological, their theory suggests a shift in thinking about death and the dead that can also be identified in other disciplines and frameworks. There are now a range of theories, understandings, and testimonies that demonstrate a move away from the idea that bonds with the dead must be severed or contained, to one that suggests that the dead remain with us, and sometimes within us, throughout our lives. The idea of a melancholic relation to the dead that emphasises their presence and agency is positioned here as a key characteristic of late postmodern culture. The three-television series analysed in chapter five are especially emblematic of this idea given that each gives voice to the dead. They can each be read in terms of Derridean understandings about the alterity of the other, what it might mean to be unconditionally hospitable to the presence of the dead in our lives and communities, as each utilises the return of the dead within their imagined worlds to offer ways to ‘make sense’ of loss, death and the living’s responsibility toward the dead.

The notion of a necessary melancholia that perpetuates the presence of the dead is perhaps put forward best by Derrida, as discussed in chapters four and five. The notion of internalising the dead other has been central to psychoanalytic understandings of loss and mourning and Derrida has written that “ever since psychoanalysis came to mark” the discourse of loss “the image commonly

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<sup>57</sup> Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” *Standard Edition*, 14: 256.

<sup>58</sup> Eng and Kazanjian, “Introduction: mourning remains,” 3-4.

<sup>59</sup> Phyllis. R. Silverman and Steven L. Nickman, “Concluding Thoughts,” in *Continuing Bonds*, 352.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 349.

used to characterize mourning is that of an interiorization,” or “an idealizing incorporation, introjection, consumption of the other,” which he associates with the Eucharist.<sup>61</sup> Derrida’s own writing introduces an ethical perspective on mourning. He suggests that the internalisation of the dead might not mean their tidy compartmentalisation, writing:

According to Freud, mourning consists in carrying the other within oneself [...] Melancholia would mark the failure and the pathology of this mourning...but if *I must* (it’s the very core of ethics) carry the other in myself to remain faithful to him, to respect his singular alterity, a certain melancholy must still protest against normal mourning. It must never be resigned to idealizing introjection. It must be enraged against what Freud says about it with calm assurance, as if to conform the norm of normality. The ‘norm’ is no more than the good conscience of amnesia. It allows us to *forget* that to keep the other within oneself, as oneself, is already to *forget* him. That’s where forgetting begins. So *there must be* melancholia.<sup>62</sup>

Derrida defends here the melancholy relation to the dead that this thesis argues is identifiable in late postmodern culture, and in particular here in autothanatographical writing and in televisual narratives that bring back the dead not as monsters, but as themselves. Derrida de-pathologises melancholia, positioning it as the only ethical position because it is the position that respects, acknowledges and actively remembers the alterity of the dead other. Reflecting on the ways in which the self or subject is both radically alone and simultaneously haunted, occupied and constituted by lost others, Derrida writes that the dead are “alone as always, more alone than ever, over there, outside, far away. Far away in us.”<sup>63</sup> Derrida seems to suggest here that the dead are not only inside of us but beside us, even if we cannot quite reach them.

The notion that the dead stay with us is central to a number of the texts examined here and can be located in a range of recent examples, though as John Berger points out, it is an “ancient” idea.<sup>64</sup> Berger expressed the following sentiment in an interview in 2015:

You see, I think that the dead are with us. What I’m talking about now is a very ancient part of human awareness. It may even be what defines the human – although [...] largely forgotten in the second half of the 20th century. The dead are not abandoned. They are kept near physically. They are a presence. What you think you’re looking at on that long road to the past is actually beside you where you stand.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Derrida, “By Force of Mourning,” 187.

<sup>62</sup> Jacques Derrida, “*Béliers. Le Dialogue ininterrompu: entre deux infinis, le poème.*” (Paris: Galilée, 2003). Section trans. By Colin Davis in Davis, *Haunted Subjects*, 147. For a full English translation of this essay see Derrida, “Rams: Uninterrupted Dialogue – Between Two Infinities, The Poem,” 160. Italics in original.

<sup>63</sup> Derrida, “By Force of Mourning,” 189.

<sup>64</sup> John Berger in Philip Maughan, “‘I think the dead are with us’ John Berger at 88,” *New Statesman America*, June 11, 2015, accessed June 23, 2020, <https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/2015/06/i-think-dead-are-us-john-berger-88>

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

Berger here emphasises a conflation of the past and the present similar to that discussed at the beginning of this conclusion and referenced throughout this thesis. He considers the tensions between cultural remembering and forgetting, suggesting that the second half of the twentieth century witnessed, rather than a denial of death, a failure to acknowledge the ways in which the dead remain present. Berger's account of his experience of feeling the presence of the dead alongside him is reminiscent of Self's autobiographical testimony featured in chapter four in which he recounts the experience of feeling his father's presence "within and beside" him as he walks.<sup>66</sup> Berger seems to emphasise that, as discussed in relation to Derrida in chapter five, it is the responsibility of the living to live with the dead. Chapter five, however, in its consideration of three televisual narratives that explicitly bring back the dead and examine whether it would be possible for the living to live with them, also emphasises what might be understood as a level of disillusionment with humans and with the living similar to that which Khapaeva describes as existing more broadly in popular culture.<sup>67</sup> The three narratives are in many ways critical of the failures of the living to account for and be accountable to the dead, or in particular *In the Flesh*, to the many others for which the dead can be understood as metaphors for within those narratives. Though the notion of the return of the dead is central to many of the texts examined in this thesis, both the autothanatographical texts considered in chapter four and the televisual narratives analysed in chapter five can be read as critical of the ways in which the living treat, respond to and engage with the dead.

Individual accounts show how unique and idiosyncratic experiences of 'living with' the dead can also be outside of fictionalised narratives. Julian Barnes, elaborating on his approach to managing the dead in his address book, explains that: "I don't like to cross them out. I know people go through their address book crossing people out when they're dead. I feel that's rather rude. I put them in square brackets."<sup>68</sup> The presence of the dead can be both felt and maintained in personal and practical ways. As Foltyn has pointed out, there has been a recent "social trend" in "talking to the dead," emphasised in particular in the opening paragraph of this thesis, that has meant that the dead are making "new 'appearances' that provide identity and meaning for many."<sup>69</sup> Though no doubt not a new phenomenon, talking to the dead and acknowledging their active presence has been a prominent message in a range of recent accounts that can be interpreted as resisting

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<sup>66</sup> Will Self, "'I'm aware of his presence, both within and beside me,'" *The Guardian*, June 15, 2008, accessed June 23, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/jun/15/biography.review>

<sup>67</sup> Khapaeva, *The Celebration of Death in Contemporary Culture*, 1.

<sup>68</sup> Julian Barnes interviewed by Margaret Crick, in *Conversations with Julian Barnes*, edited by Vanessa Guignery and Ryan Roberts (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009), 152.

<sup>69</sup> Foltyn, "The corpse in contemporary culture," 99.

consolatory messages and emphasising ambivalence. In 2019 Jayson Greene, whose two-year-old daughter Greta died suddenly in 2015 when struck by falling masonry, shared his experiences with the BBC after writing a book about his family's loss. He and his wife Stacy went on to have a son, Harrison. Greene explains that the ending of his book with the arrival of his son was never meant to imply closure. He tells reporter Kev Geoghegan that "I understand there's this suggestion within the framework, somehow, that because we had Harrison, our lives were complete and whole and all these things."<sup>70</sup> He explains:

I didn't want to tell a story like that. Because it felt false. I felt a moral need to not replace Greta with Harrison in our lives in a story. And so the book ends in this ambivalent place, I think there's a beauty to the fact that I can talk to both of my children, but one of them is not here. The loss will forever be this undernote in our lives, always humming beneath the surface.<sup>71</sup>

Greene's poignant reflections on his family's loss emphasise the enduring bonds that exist between the living and the dead, the ways in which the living can continue to converse with those whose losses constitute them and the ways in which, as Derrida has written, mourning is "Interminable. Inconsolable. Irreconcilable. Right up until death - that is what whoever works at mourning knows."<sup>72</sup> It is suggested in this thesis that the autothanatographical texts and the televisual narratives that form the focus of the analysis here are all concerned with how the dead are constituted by the living, with acknowledging the complex, ambivalent and at times fraught relationships that can exist between the living and the dead in both imagined worlds and in personal experience, and with 'making sense' not in terms of a tidy and linear narrative or clear cut answers, but in terms of a complex, interminable, impossible process of grappling with potential meanings and conflicting experiences. It is as such that late postmodern culture is positioned here not only as a space that is hospitable to engagement with death and the dead, but as an environment in which engagement that is conflicting, complicated, ambivalent, melancholic, difficult and lacking in any sense of resolution might find itself quite 'at home.'

Where many of the texts examined here seem to seek to avoid a tidy, clear or linear conclusion, from Barnes, Diski's and Self's autothanatographical engagement explored in chapter four to the televisual texts examined in chapter five, Greene also hints at the risks of imperatives to make a neat narrative of life that might seem to adhere to Freud's early conceptions of mourning and melancholia, that suggested that one's losses could be replaced, and that people might be able

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<sup>70</sup> Jayson Greene speaking to Kev Geoghegan, "'Surviving my daughter's sudden death'," *BBC News*, May 26, 2019, accessed June 23, 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-48384044>

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Derrida, "By Force of Mourning," 172.

to 'move on.' Rather, Greene emphasises the need for responsibility and for a moral position that neither burdens the living with taking on the place of the dead nor surrenders an ethical obligation to the dead themselves. Greene seems to express what Derrida has described as "the sublimity of a mourning without sublimation."<sup>73</sup> In a TED Talk, Nora McNerny, author of *No Happy Endings: A Memoir* (2019), *The Hot Young Widows Club: Lessons on Survival from the Front Lines of Grief* (2019) and host of the podcast *Terrible, Thanks for Asking* (2016 -) expresses a similar sentiment. She discusses how her dead husband Erin is "present" for her and how she has "not moved on from Erin," but "forward with him."<sup>74</sup> She describes how formative losses "mark us and make us" and tell us that "some things can't be fixed and not all wounds are meant to heal."<sup>75</sup> However, this does not mean only suffering. She emphasises that after profound loss, "you can and will be sad and happy, you'll be grieving and able to love in the same year or week, the same breath."<sup>76</sup> What might be deemed a melancholic relation to the dead that rejects problematic notions of 'moving on' can include joy and love as well as pain and loss, and a range of recent and seemingly anti-consolatory accounts attest to this. S

There is of course a difference between our individual capacity to maintain such a melancholic relation to the dead when they are our friends and loved ones, and a culture's broader capacity to be responsible for and to its innumerable dead. Perry has suggested that "maybe we die when we are forgotten or not loved anymore."<sup>77</sup> Barnes writes that "we live, we die, we are remembered, we are forgotten. Not immediately, but in tranches."<sup>78</sup> The capacity of the living to remember the dead and to continue to love them has its limits, as the living themselves age and die. The complexities around this kind of remembering are examined in chapter four, where Barnes in particular considers the responsibility of the "principal remember," and wonders when memories stop being memories and start being stories.<sup>79</sup> Acknowledging and reaffirming the presence of the dead in terms of our individual loved ones presents different challenges to acknowledging and reaffirming the presence of those dead to whom we have no tangible connection. The difficulties that arise here are explored in the televisual narratives discussed in chapter five, wherein the consequences of being hospitable to the dead both individually and *en masse* are negotiated, with

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<sup>73</sup> Derrida, *MEMOIRES for Paul de Man*, 38.

<sup>74</sup> Nora McNerny, "We don't 'move on' from grief, we move forward with it," November, 2018, accessed June 23, 2020, [https://www.ted.com/talks/nora\\_mcnerny\\_we\\_don\\_t\\_move\\_on\\_from\\_grief\\_we\\_move\\_forward\\_with\\_it?utm\\_source=facebook.com&utm\\_medium=social&utm\\_campaign=tedspread#t-893704](https://www.ted.com/talks/nora_mcnerny_we_don_t_move_on_from_grief_we_move_forward_with_it?utm_source=facebook.com&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=tedspread#t-893704)

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Grayson Perry: *Rites of Passage*, episode one "Death," directed by Neil Crompton, August 23, 2018.

<sup>78</sup> Barnes, *Nothing*, 218.

<sup>79</sup> Barnes, *Levels*, 90.

the return of the loved, remembered and missed dead positioned as predominantly desirable, and the return of multitudes of the unknown dead positioned as undesirable. Discussing Confucius and ancestor worship, Timothy Secret suggests that “the dead are the most easily forgotten in our society” and “if we are to live well together we need to include them.”<sup>80</sup> He argues that

turning the dead into ancestors and taking care of those who once cared for us is a step toward acknowledging the responsibility we have to each other. What’s at stake is our humanness, which is not our reason or our language but our responsibilities. And in the end it’s our responsibility for those who are most easily ignored that defines us.<sup>81</sup>

Here, postmodernism’s concern with the voices, testimonies and stories of the marginalised coupled with capitalism’s capacity to make those stories heard might offer opportunities. The abundance of written, visual, spoken and multimodal accounts and narratives that explore ideas about death and focus on the dead offer starting points for considering the responsibility of the living toward the dead, not only in terms of personal experiences of intimate loss, but in terms of a broader cultural responsibility.

In what this thesis has argued is the hospitable environment of late postmodern culture, an environment highly conducive to the presence of both death and the dead, new opportunities for varied and widespread engagement should continue to arise. The extent to which the hospitality that it is argued here is afforded to the dead in late postmodern culture is conditional, and the extent to which it could ever be unconditional, have been considered in particular in relation to the televisual narratives explored in chapter five. Chapter four has also outlined some of the ways in which the dead are felt to be both included and excluded in different ways in the personal narratives examined there, exploring the ways in which the dead might be ‘at home’ in the narrative of a life. It has been argued in chapter one that late postmodern culture is largely hospitable to engagement with death and the dead as a consequence of postmodern impulses toward multiplicity and melancholic ambivalence coupled with capitalism’s tendency toward giving everything a place on the market. These impulses have combined with the primacy of the self in late postmodern culture explored in chapter three, which has made an interest in the self in life and in death of central concern across a wide spectrum of cultural texts. There is no doubt that the proliferation of current engagement with death and the dead in popular and unpopular culture is diverse in its thematic focus and in the extent to which it might be construed by diverse audiences as meaningful. This is perhaps one of the many reasons death has attracted the critical academic attention it has within

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<sup>80</sup> Timothy Secret, “Philosopher Timothy Secret on Ancestor Worship,” July 24, 2015, accessed June 23, 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b062n4nd>

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.



the burgeoning framework of death studies infrastructures discussed in the introduction. However, this thesis has also argued that the hospitable environment offered by the confluence of capitalism, postmodernism and its attendant focus on the self and, in turn, the other, has produced especially fertile ground both for a multiplicity of engagement with death and the dead, and for the emergence of both personal and fictional accounts concerned with undertaking what has been described here as the interminable, deconstructive, and impossible to conclude process of 'making sense' of death, the dead, the self and the other in a range of complex, ambivalent and potentially challenging ways. Thematically, the examples examined here both of autothanatography in chapter four and televisual narratives in chapter five can be read as revealing a significant concern with responsibility, of the living toward the dead and to the not yet born, and the formidable challenge of hospitality, both toward the dead and toward the others for whom they may stand as metaphor.

Penfold-Mounce has argued that "the pervasive ordinariness of death and the dead in popular culture highlights a normalisation of the presence of death outside personal experience or the death industry."<sup>82</sup> It certainly seems that such a normalisation is taking place. This thesis has offered a wide range of examples of ways in which death and the dead have become a part of the fabric of late postmodern culture and the ways in which they are engaged with within it. Throughout the thesis examples of what Jameson calls "inverted millenarianism" have been emphasised, as the death or end of phenomena are continually announced.<sup>83</sup> Sometimes this seems premature, for example in terms of the novel or film, both of which continue to thrive despite having undergone significant changes in terms of production, distribution and consumption. Often, what pronouncements of death signal is significant change. 2019 saw the commemoration of Iceland's Okjokull glacier with a plaque after it was officially declared dead in 2014 as a consequence of climate change. The plaque speaks to the future, anticipating the death of those who produced it and leaving their words as a legacy and a call to responsibility. It has the following written on it: "This monument is to acknowledge that we know what is happening and what needs to be done. Only you know if we did it."<sup>84</sup> If such pronouncements of death do signal change, then cultural texts are one way of tracing and interrogating changes and how they are interpreted, negotiated and played out differently across different cultural spaces. Here, autothanatography, televisual narratives and, more broadly, academic theory have been analysed, revealing sometimes competing, and sometimes seemingly in agreement, shifts in cultural engagement with death and the dead in what

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<sup>82</sup> Penfold-Mounce, *Death, the Dead and Popular Culture*, 4.

<sup>83</sup> Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 1.

<sup>84</sup> Toby Luckhurst, "Iceland's Okjokull glacier commemorated with plaque," *BBC News*, August 18, 2019, accessed June 23, 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-49345912>

has been defined here as late postmodern culture, a partial and complicated rather than linear periodisation in which death and the dead might be especially 'at home.'

The example of the Okjokull glacier is perhaps indicative of a broader concern with responsibility to the living, the dead and the not yet born that this thesis argues now exists, both driving and driven by contemporary engagement with death and the dead. It is through the analysis of cultural texts that such concerns can be mapped, explored and examined in terms of potential meanings, and the practice of interdisciplinary and humanities approaches to the analysis of such texts can afford a range of different perspectives. The impact and value of the analysis of cultural texts both individually and in terms of what they might speak to collectively is not necessarily immediately clear. However, it is argued here that the analyses of cultural texts that both constitute and reflect processes of human meaning-making, or what is described here as 'making sense,' do have value. They have value both in their capacity to emphasise, examine and reflect on the value of other texts, and in their capacity to extract different meanings, identify shifts, idiosyncrasies, and broader cultural concerns. If impact and value are conceived of narrowly, then such research is unlikely to be deemed of significant interest. However, if impact and value are understood in terms of the capacity for cultural texts to offer both insight into people's meaning-making processes and in terms of the capacity to shape how people 'make sense,' then their value might be more evident. Understood in this way, all cultural texts become the spaces through which it is possible to develop a nuanced understanding of the different ways in which texts and their creators both respond to and conceive of the world around them, in turn providing insight into the ways in which people might 'make sense' of their worlds and experiences, and offering their readers new ways of 'making sense' themselves. Simultaneously, the analysis of texts allows for the delineation of trends, changes, and patterns in cultural concerns and the meanings people make. As cited earlier in this conclusion, Moore has suggested that it is easier to imagine the end of the world as we know it than the end of our own lives.<sup>85</sup> There seems to be an increasing possibility of the two coinciding for those currently living or for their children, and this is perhaps another factor in not only the normalisation of death and the dead, but in the urgency with which they seem to be being addressed. The television series *The Fades* and to an extent the television series *Les Revenants*, with their concerns with ecological crises and human 'progress,' are pertinent examples of this concern. Sue Black has pointed out that "there is only one way to discover the truth about dying, death and being dead, and that is to do it, which we all get round to eventually."<sup>86</sup> In the meantime, death and the dead are on the agenda and

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<sup>85</sup> Alan Moore in *Lek and the Dogs*, dir. Andrew Kötting, Salon Pictures, 2018, Feature Film.

<sup>86</sup> Sue Black, *All that Remains: a life in death* (London: Transworld Publishers, 2018), 338.

open to being 'made sense' of from a wide range of perspectives, in cultural texts that range from personal, to fictional to academic. The analysis of those texts in all of their diversity, individually and combined, can offer opportunities for valuable contributions to knowledge.

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## Artworks

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## Films and Television Series

*120 Beats Per Minute*. Directed by Robin Campillo. Memento Films. 2017. Feature Film.

*A Cock and Bull Story*. Directed by Michael Winterbottom. BBC Films. 2005. Feature Film.

*After Life*. Created by Ricky Gervais. Netflix. 2019 – present. Television Series.

*Being Human*. Created by Toby Whithouse. BBC Three. 2008-2013. Television Series.

*Big Brother*. Created by John de Mol. Channel 4. Channel 5. 2000-2018. Television Series.

*Black Mirror*. Created by Charlie Brooker. Channel 4. Netflix. 2011 – present. Television Anthology.

*Black Mirror: Bandersnatch*. Created by Charlie Brooker. Netflix. 2018. Interactive Film.

*Buffy The Vampire Slayer*. Created by Joss Whedon. The WB and UPN. 1997-2003. Television Series.

*Dawn of the Dead*. Directed by George A. Romero. United Film Distribution Company. 1978. Feature Film.

*Dead to Me*. Created by Liz Feldman. Netflix. 2019 – present. Television Series.

*Glitch*. Created by Tony Ayres and Louise Fox. ABC. 2015-2019. Television Series.

*Gogglebox*. Created by Stephen Lambert and Tania Alexander. Channel 4, 2013 – present. Television Series.

*Grayson Perry: Rites of Passage*. Directed by Neil Crombie. Swan Films. 2018. Television Series.

*In the Flesh*. Created by Dominic Mitchell. BBC Three. 2013-2014. Television Series.

*Intruders*. Written and developed by Glen Morgan. BBC America. 2014. Television Series.

*Island*. Directed by Steven Eastwood. Hakawati. 2018. Feature Film.

*Lek and the Dogs*. Directed by Andrew Kötting, Salon Pictures. 2018. Feature Film.

*Les Revenants*. Created by Fabrice Gobert. Haut et Court. 2012-2015. Television Series.

*Ray Donovan*. Created by Anne Biderman. Showtime. 2012-present. Television Series.

*Resurrection*. Developed by Aaron Zelman. ABC. 2014-2015. Television Series.

*The Dick Van Dyke Show*. Created by Carl Reiner. CBS. 1961-1966. Television Series.

*The Fades*. Created by Jack Thorne. BBC Three. 2011. Television Series.

*The Matrix*. Directed by The Wachowskis. Warner Brothers Pictures. 1999. Feature Film.

*The Returned*. Developed by Carlton Cruse. A&E Studios. 2015. Television Series.

*The Vampire Diaries*. Developed by Kevin Williamson and Julie Plec. THE CW. 2009-2017. Television Series.

*The Walking Dead*. Developed by Frank Darabont. AMC studios. 2010 – present. Television Series.

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*Warm Bodies*. Directed by Jonathan Levine. Mandeville Films. 2013. Feature Film.

*What We Do in the Shadows*. Directed by Jemaine Clement and Taika Waititi. Madman Entertainment. 2014. Feature Film.

*What We Do in the Shadows*. Created by Jemaine Clement. FX. 2019-present. Television Series.

*Žižek!* Directed by Astra Taylor. Zeitgeist Films. 2015. Feature Film.

### **Television Series Individual Episode Citations**

*Grayson Perry: Rites of Passage*. Episode one. “Death.” Directed by Neil Crombie. August 23, 2018.

*In the Flesh*. Season one. Episode one. Directed by Jonny Campbell. March 17, 2013.

*In the Flesh*. Season one. Episode two. Directed by Jonny Campbell. March 24, 2013

*In the Flesh*. Season One. Episode Three. Directed by Jonny Campbell. March 31, 2013.

*In the Flesh*. Season two. Episode one. Directed by Jim O’Hanlon. May 4, 2014.

*In the Flesh*. Season two. Episode three. Directed by Damon Thomas. May 18, 2014.

*In the Flesh*. Season two. Episode four. Directed by Damon Thomas. May 25, 2014.

*In the Flesh*. Season two. Episode five. Directed by Alice Troughton. June 1, 2014.

*In the Flesh*. Season two. Episode six. Directed by Alice Troughton. June 8, 2014.

*Les Revenants*. Season one. Episode one. "Camille." Directed by. Fabrice Gobert. November 26, 2012.

*Les Revenants*. Season one. Episode two. "Simon." Directed by Fabrice Gobert. November 26, 2012.

*Les Revenants*. Season two. Episode eight. "The Returned." Directed by Fabrice Gobert and Frédéric Goupil. October 19, 2015.

*The Fades*. Episode one. Directed by Farren Blackburn. September 21, 2011.

*The Fades*. Episode six. Directed by Tom Shankland. October 26, 2011.

*The Fades*. Episode four. Directed by Tom Shankland, October 26, 2011.